

A Wild Last Boss Appeared! Volume 4

Firehead

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4

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Character Introduction



Karkinos the Crab
One of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars who follow Lufas. A long crab who boasts the highest defense capabilities among the Twelve Heavenly Stars.



Scorpious the Scorpion
One of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars who follow Lufas. An emperor beneath scorpion as well as a poison specialist.

Minamijunji Sei
The hero summoned from modern Japan. An extremely normal and average boy, but also honest, hardworking, and has a strong sense of justice.

Virgo the Maiden
A heaven-sent girl who was added to the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars in place of her predecessor.

In disguise

Meo
The person who created and played as Lufas Maphaahl in the MMO *Exotic Online*. After being told by the Goddess of Creation, Aloreana, "I will give you a new role," he was immediately whisked away to the game world, possessing his character's body.

Lufas Maphaahl
Once on the cusp of world domination and feared as the "Black Winged Conqueror". Sealed for 200 years, she's now on a journey to meet her old friends, the Seven Heroes, as well as her old followers, the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars.

Luna

Terra

Devil King

Characters they have met:



One of the Seven Luminaries who follow the Devil King.



The Devil King's son.



The leader of all the devilds and the official Last Boss.



Aigokeros
Follower of Lufas and leader of the Goat unit in the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars.



Libra
Follower of Lufas and leader of the Scales unit in the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars.



Aries
Follower of Lufas and leader of the Ram unit in the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars.



Dina
A beautiful girl who tag along as Lufas's advisor.

STORY RECAP:

I, who possessed the body of my in-game character, Lufas Maphaahl, traveled to Vanaheim along with my advisor, Dina, and members of the Twelve Heavenly Stars in order to meet Parthenos the Maiden.

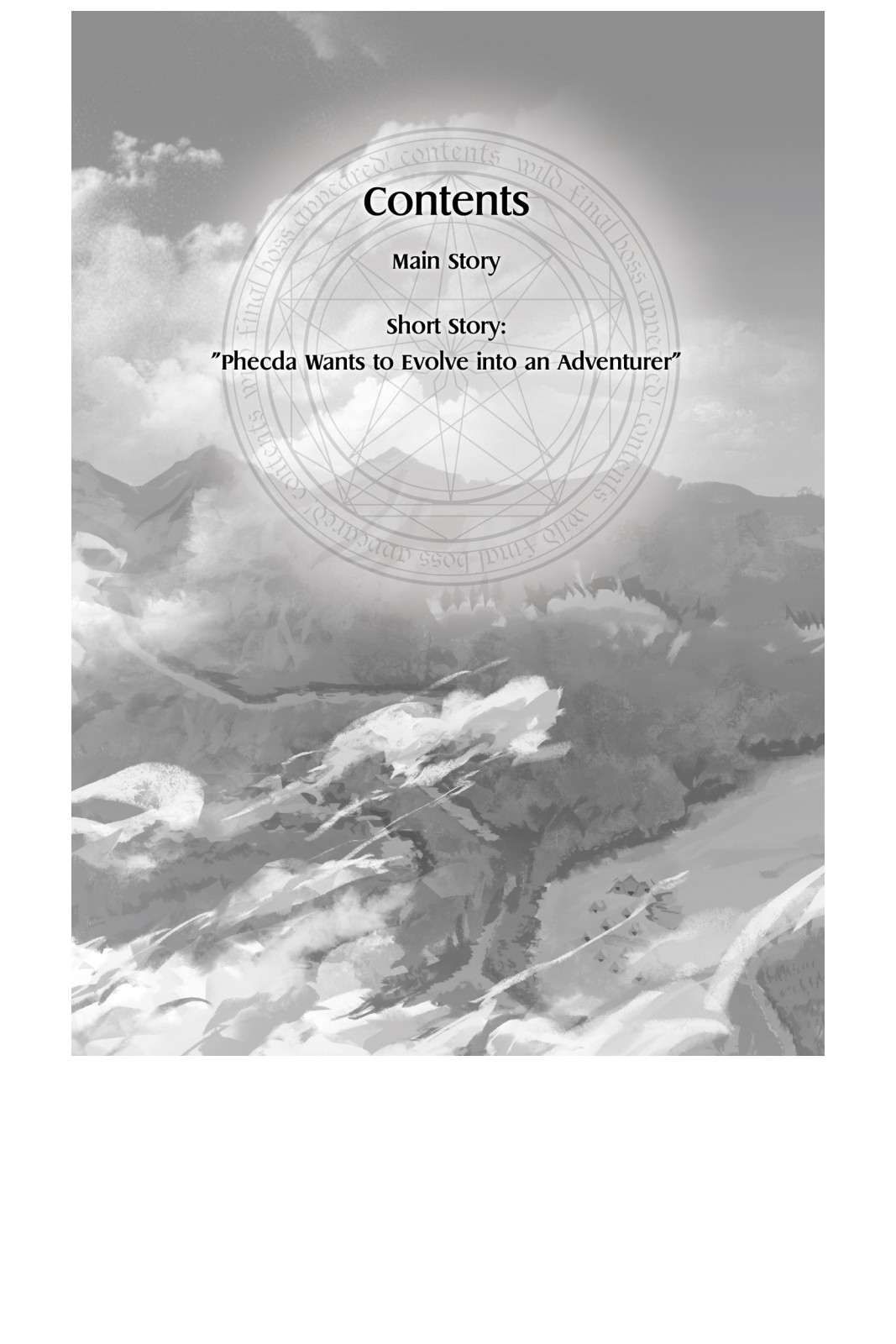
But when we got there, we found a heaven-winged girl named Virgo living by herself. According to her, Parthenos had passed away.

...Like, seriously?

So, in Parthenos's place, Virgo joined us as the new member filling the Maiden seat, and we headed to Blutgang next.

In Blutgang, we managed to reunite with Karkinos the Crab without incident, but the place was suddenly attacked by monsters. And of all things, the horde of monsters was led by Scorpius the Scorpion...





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Short Story:

"Phecda Wants to Evolve into an Adventurer"

The mass-produced Libras led us through the streets of Blutgang. According to them, they were taking us to the royals-only section. It seemed they wanted us to meet their master or whoever, but their creator could only have been Mizar. *Does that mean Mizar's actually alive?*

There was also the possibility that they had a new owner. For example, Libra had also been made by Mizar, but she called *me* master. Something like this might be normal, since it had a precedent.

For now, let's just prepare to run away if need be... I'd need to be ready to leave quickly in case they wanted me to hand over Scorpius. Sure, I'd feel guilty doing it, but I still wouldn't hesitate to get violent either. I wanted to avoid that outcome if possible, but I valued my subordinates.

As we walked, the real Libra and Aries came running from the other side of the street. Libra glanced towards the three mass-produced, half-broken Libras, but she quickly turned back to me as if they were nothing.

"Reporting in, master. We have successfully eliminated the devilfolk in the city. By the way, about those golems there that look to be the same model as me..."

"Pleased to meet you. I am Mass-Produced Libra Unit 3. I take it you are the original? Welcome to Blutgang. We welcome your arrival."

"Thank you for the polite welcome. I am Libra."

Both Libra and the mass-produced Libras bowed to each other and then proceeded to stand in formation, as if it were only natural.

Huh...? Is that it? Shouldn't there be, like... Something? Like, something more? The conversation between the Libras was surprisingly short, and afterward, they exchanged no more words. *I guess I should have expected that out of golems. They're really indifferent.*

The only one we're missing is Aigokeros... Oh, there he is. He was standing in a hole in a wall, completely out of it. *The hell is he doing?*

"Hey, Aigokeros."

When I called out to him, he reacted in a really exaggerated manner. As soon as he turned around, Aigokeros turned into his human form and prostrated himself before me right then and there.

Ohh, I get it. He doesn't have legs in his goat form, so he can't prostrate properly. Not like I wanted him to, though.

"M-My apologies, master! I was unable to fulfill the grand role you had given me: to capture one of the Seven Luminaries alive...!"

Ohhh, I get it. It seemed like the fact that he'd failed to carry out my orders was getting to him.

It's not like there was anything he could have done about it, since the Devil King's son showed up on top of one of the Seven Luminaries already being there... It's my fault for not seeing that coming. But it looked like Aigokeros didn't think the same way, since even now he was repeatedly apologizing.

"I see, I see. So you ran in the face of one of the Seven Luminaries when you have such an overwhelming level advantage? What a stupendous failure on your part."

"H A H A H A! I see your strength hasn't accompanied you through these two hundred years, Aigokeros!"

While I was trying to come up with a way to comfort Aigokeros, Libra and Karkinos came in with the speed and smoothness of river rapids and started throwing salt in his wounds.

Hey, stop that! Do you guys not know the meaning of mercy?

Dina even said to Virgo, "See that? That's what a useless man who can't do his job looks like."

Come on. Stop that!

Only Aries tried to comfort Aigokeros, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Ah... Hmm... Well, don't worry about it. Just make sure to learn from this failure."

Please don't change, Aries.

"Wh-What touching mercy! I will succeed next time! Even if I have to sacrifice my life!"

"No, don't do that. Don't just kill yourself like that!"

Oh no. What should I do? This goat's loyalty just hurts. If things stay like this, Aigokeros might seriously commit suicide. If I don't give him some easy job next to help him regain his confidence, this might turn out badly. Or maybe I should put together some sort of event to help him feel better? Maybe one where he can eat as much grass as he wants?

At any rate, with Aigokeros' reappearance, we'd all managed to regroup. Scorpius, who was still unconscious, was being carried by Karkinos while we once again started following the mass-produced Libras.

After we reached the fourteenth town by riding some sort of elevator-like thing, we were greeted by a giant door and several dwarves. They weren't armed, so it didn't seem as if they intended to fight... *I should be ready just in case, though.*

"Welcome to Blutgang. We've been waiting, Lady Lufas Maphaahl. I am Jenner. I have the honor of being in charge of Blutgang's military branch."

"We see... So you already know about us. Then We suppose there is no need for these bandages."

Apparently I'd long been found out. Well, I suppose I couldn't have been anyone else, given that I had the original Libra with me, had managed to punch Scorpius out, and then had recovered Scorpius instead of killing her.

I handed my stealth bandages to Dina and took off my fake glasses. When I did, the dwarves all groaned. The impact of my undisguised appearance must have been too much for them.

"So, why were We called here? Was this an ambush to try and capture us?"

"You jest. If we dared to antagonize you with Scorpius inside Blutgang, we'd all be dead. I'm quite desperate not to anger you right now, actually."

"Then that is fine."

Apparently the dwarves were really nervous right now. It made sense, though, since I was basically a world-renowned villain. To them, it was as if they'd let a last boss who should have already been defeated into their country. Of course they'd be nervous. I'd started to forget, but in this world, I was the symbol of fear. There wouldn't be many people who would still interact with me normally after knowing that I was Lufas. In that sense, these dwarves were really trying their best.

"Then please, tell us what you want. You called us all the way here, at great risk to yourselves. What is worth that?"

"About that. You won't be meeting our current royalty. You will be heading further in, past the royal area."

"What? What do you mean?"

"It would be faster for you to see for yourself. I will lead you from here."

The dwarf, who'd named himself as Jenner, pulled on a lever beside him. When he did, the door opened, and the view of the royal area greeted us.

The first thing I saw was a huge garden. In the distance, there was a pool and a court, which was probably used for some sort of sport. In the center of the area was a huge, white building that looked like a high-class luxury hotel. There were also several gigantic dog monsters with lion-like manes that seemed to be fulfilling the role of guard dogs.

There was something that looked like them on Earth, I think. They were Tibetan mastiffs...?

The upsized, Tibetan-mastiff-like monsters looked really imposing, but given how this world had dinosaurs in it, they weren't that big a threat in comparison. In the grand scheme of things, they were actually quite cute for monsters. *I bet they're fluffy and nice to pet.*

But they were all trembling with their tails between their legs. It

was quite shocking. *I like dogs a lot, though...*

I passed by the terrified doggies and continued even further in. Every once in a while I sensed someone glancing at me... It seemed as if there were several people in the castle who were interested in me. I locked eyes with the dwarven children who were the culprits and waved, but a woman who seemed to be their mother hurriedly pulled them away.

It's not like I'm gonna up and eat them just because we met gazes or something...

"I've never seen anyone so rude. I will go massacre—"

"Stop that, you fool." I scolded Aigokeros and threw in a little poke on top.

Whoops. There's an idiot who actually would do that. I bet at least half the reason I'm so feared is this guy's fault. I mean, look at how scared the dwarf showing the way is. He's even putting on a brave face as he looks at me, like he's prepared to sacrifice himself when the time comes... The hell am I supposed to do with that?

Eventually we were shown to the deepest part of the royal area... In other words, we reached a wall. There was nothing there. One of the dwarves laid their hand on the wall and muttered something. When they did so, the wall opened, revealing a room. The dwarf must have muttered some kind of secret password or something.

"This is...?"

The room was bare. Compared to the flamboyantly decorated areas before, it was like this room existed in a completely different space... The room was enclosed by bare stone walls and a bare stone ceiling. Something that looked like a crystal, which faintly glowed blue, stood in the center of the room and was the only thing within it.

"Is that a golem...?"

"Yes. This golem is the center of all of Blutgang and serves as its brain. It is also our great king, who entrusted all of his knowledge and memories here right before he died..."

"What? That's ridiculous."

Having heard Jenner's words, I couldn't help but stare at the crystal.

Is he really "here?"

Are you really there, Mizar?

As if to answer my question, the crystal glowed stronger before emitting a voice that I didn't remember... But it still sounded very familiar.

"So you're here. It's been a while, Lufas, my friend. As well as you, my greatest creation, my daughter."

"Mizar..."

"Sir...Mizar..."

Apparently it was the real Mizar. It was obvious from Libra's reaction. But I was convinced regardless.

There's no doubt. This is Mizar.

I had no actual proof, but somehow, I didn't need any. Something inside me was convinced.

"We see. So Blutgang was not just a protective charm you left to your people but you yourself. To think you became a golem... There's a limit to how much of a golem fanatic one can be."

"Khaa ha ha! Is that a compliment?"

"Fool. We are exasperated."

Seriously. Who'd expect someone to become a golem?

There was a fun character in an RPG I'd played once upon a time called "Dungeonman" who loved dungeons so much he ended up becoming one. But I never expected to know someone that foolish.

"Aw, don't be like that. This was necessary. After all, I wasn't exactly myself back then."

I paused. "You mean two hundred years ago?"

"Yeah. I'm not trying to make excuses, but Mizar was acting strangely. I can say that, since the crystal that was to be the control golem for Blutgang—otherwise known as me—was finished early. Something forced Mizar to act back then. That was painful to watch. Imagine seeing the original you becoming stranger day by day. It was like watching myself transform into someone else. It's funny, right? That the copy is closer to 'Mizar' than the real thing?" He was quiet for a moment before continuing. "Soon enough, I couldn't tell which one of us was the real Mizar."

I had no reply to that.

By copying his personality onto a golem, temporarily there had been two Mizars. One had been the real one, who'd then changed and became stranger every day. The other was the copy that had maintained Mizar's original personality. Since the copy had been there, it'd experienced that weirdness, watching itself change from an objective point of view. He'd literally seen himself becoming someone else.

What torture... That's something that would drive anyone crazy.

"When did it start happening?"

"Let's see... Probably when you all came back from the Goddess's holy land. I think after that he started treating you as an enemy. I bet Alioth, Megrez, and Dubhe were the same."

"What about the others?"

"Merak was always in danger, since Vanaheim is right at the Goddess's feet. As for Phecda... Well, that one always wandered around here and there. I bet it just happened at some point. No idea about Benet, though. She's always been really attached to you. To be

honest, I feel like she'd have picked a fight with you even without the Goddess's interference."

Benetnasch... No matter where I go, whatever I hear about her is always the same. It's always that "she's always been dangerous." Seriously, you vampire? Just how bad do you have to be in order to be regarded like that by your friends?

Anyway, I should put her aside for now.

"You know, I've always been a little afraid of you as an alchemist. I couldn't help but feel like you might take the title of Mizgarz's best blacksmith out from under me, you know? But wanting to kill you because of that was just unnatural. That's why I transferred my consciousness early, while I was still myself, so that this version of me would still be me."

"..."

"At the end, 'I' was completely gone. All the original could think about was defeating you. He stopped listening to me completely. And, well..." Mizar paused before delivering the next sentence in a regretful, pitying tone. "You know the rest."

"After you were gone, it was like whatever demon had possessed him left. But it was all too late. At the very least, he wanted to defeat the Devil King to make up for what he'd done. But there was no way anyone could win all desperate like that, so he lost, and his arm was taken. In the end, the original Mizar... He lost his friend, his arm, the peaceful world, everything... He regretted everything from the bottom of his heart, and even into his old age he'd weep and mope about... It was so hard to watch..." Mizar said, his voice quiet and forlorn.

I had no reply. I just didn't know what to say.

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"Oh, sorry. Got all dark and depressing there. I didn't bring you here to say all that."

The crystal shined faintly as it talked. On the outside, it may have looked like nothing but a diamond-like object, but strangely, I could see an unrefined dwarf with a smile on his face. Somehow, I knew that was exactly what Mizar would've been doing if he'd had a body right now.

Just as an aside, the Mizar I remembered was also indistinguishable from other dwarves. *Shave, goddammit. Your hair's the entire reason you all look the same.*

"I wanted to tell you all the information I knew about the Goddess. Still, it might not be anything new to you."

"Let's hear it."

Info on the Goddess? That's the one thing I want most right now.

While it had basically been confirmed that Alovenus was behind all this, I just couldn't imagine what her end goal even was. Though Dina, or someone like her, might know.

"All right. First, I'll talk about the devilfolk and her connection to them. You probably already expected this, but the devilfolk and the Goddess are indeed connected. Also, you should know about the true nature of the devilfolk."

Aigokeros cut off Mizar with the answer. "They're magic."

Everyone's attention gathered on Aigokeros.

"Oh, you already knew? Well, I guess that isn't so surprising."

"Of course. There would have to be something wrong with someone for them to not notice those badly made defects."

Well, sorry for having something wrong with me... If I'd actually said that out loud, it might have killed the conversation, so for now, I decided to shut up and listen.

"Magic? Like an actual spell?"

"Exactly, Aries. Magic is a technique to cause a phenomenon by altering mana. Using the Metal element as an example, it becomes possible to create physical things."

"But aren't the devilfolk living...?"

"They are not. They are simply a spell which creates something that imitates a living thing."

While listening to the conversation between Aigokeros and Aries, I remembered what the Devil King had said to me before. He'd told me that the devilfolk were something that had been created by the Goddess, and they would disappear when they died.

I evidently used to spit devilfolk heads on posts, so apparently they remained for at least a while after they died. But the fact that they became mana when they died and that the bodies disappeared without a trace did give them something in common with any other spell.

No, wait a second. Was I beheading them as an experiment to see how long it would take for their heads to disappear?

"They are a magic spell that was unleashed upon humanity... That is why they all instinctively attack humans. It's just like Fire magic. The magic doesn't wonder why it was unleashed. The devilfolk are an attack spell cast by the Goddess and aimed at humanity."

"N-No way..."

"O h..."

After hearing Aigokeros's explanation, Virgo turned pale, and Karkinos tilted his head back and stared up into the sky.

I'd long known that the Goddess and the devilfolk were connected, but I'd never expected that the devilfolk would be a magic spell. Reality turned out to be nothing as sweet as I'd expected. She

hadn't simply given orders as their creator or manipulated their minds. The devilfolk themselves were an attack upon humanity by the Goddess.

"Though there are some exceptions."

"Exceptions? Do you mean that guy, Terra?"

"Exactly, my master. There is no doubt that Terra is the result of magic, but the caster is different. Terra alone was cast by the Devil King."

"We see. So that is why he is the Devil King's son."

So the devilfolk are literally magic... I see. Actually, it makes a lot of sense, now that I think about it.

Still, that's a really harsh truth...

"They are simply a magic spell that thinks it has free will... They are puppets created by the Goddess with no souls of their own."

"Like an NPC..."

"Master?"

"Nothing, never mind."

"Puppets with no souls." After hearing that, the first thing I thought of was video games. I was reminded of NPCs that game devs would prepare to give life to the in-game world. While at first glance they might have seemed like real characters with their own wills, there was actually nobody inside the character. They were simply puppets that moved according to prewritten programs. That was the true identity of the devilfolk.

From the opposite perspective, though, that also meant that the regular townspeople and monsters I normally thought of as NPCs no longer fit that definition, since they weren't magic but actual people with clear wills. If there happened to be another person with knowledge from my world, they might also have equated the devilfolk to NPCs with this knowledge.

Mizar waited for Aigokeros to finish before continuing his speech. I returned my attention to him, temporarily putting thoughts of NPCs aside. Even if I pitied them, it would amount to nothing.

"There's also one more 'magic spell with a consciousness' that the Goddess created. I managed to get an idea of it after many years of research.

"Once upon a time, the Goddess planned to use this being as an agent or representative, but the being rebelled due to a difference in their perceptions of humanity and left the Goddess's control. It was said to have changed into a fish and fled into the oceans."

"Hmm, if Terra is the Devil King's son, then this being would be the Goddess's child? So, what is its name?"

"Eros."

"What a name..."

I couldn't describe the feeling that welled up in me after hearing the name from Mizar.

The hell is that? That name is definitely going to cause bullying. So if you combine this name with the name of the Devil King's son, the two children can be called Terraeros? I've heard of some just god-awful names before, but Eros is up there with the worst. What the hell was Alovenus thinking when she named it?

But as I looked around at my party, the Twelve Heavenly Stars—Aries, Libra, Aigokeros, Karkinos—all of them looked surprised.

"M-Miss Lufas!"

"Hmm?"

"How are you so calm?! It's Eros! You know, Pisces the 'Fish'...? It's his real name!"

What...?!

The bombshell that came out of Aries's mouth caused me to freeze.

Alovenus's child is one of ours?! Actually, wait... I managed to capture one of the Goddess's children?! Panicking, I quickly sunk my consciousness inward. When I did so, I did indeed discover memories of a blond young man.

Is it just me or was he being surrounded by my party members and being driven half to tears by them calling him Eros over and over?

"A-Ah, right... Now that you mention it..."

"What? He was your subordinate?" Mizar said exasperatedly.

Hey, this is the first I'm hearing of it too.

"Oh, right. Hey, Lufas... If possible, could I ask you to repair the mass-produced Libras? You can use any of the materials in Blutgang."

"We do not mind, but there's nothing We can do about the one that was blasted to pieces. Is that okay?"

"For the one that's in pieces... You can use it to make whatever you wish. Just disposing of it doesn't feel right."

"Understood."

I took on Mizar's request, but an idea suddenly came to mind. *Why not take the scrap parts from the broken Libra to make a new armament for Libra?*

I'd always thought that golems did not grow and could not surpass their limits. It was common sense. But I had an idea. If Libra herself couldn't be strengthened, why not simply bolster her strength with separate equipment? For example, if there were a golem that was super-specialized in STR, it would be shit on its own. However, if the golem were actually a weapon and could be freely wielded by Libra, then that would mean Libra's ATK stat would be boosted.

"There was actually something We wanted to make. It's been a while. Why not team up together once more, Mizar? Even if you can't

use alchemy yourself, your knowledge still remains, no?"

"That sounds fun! Your wild ideas always manage to surprise me. What did you just think of?"

It seemed like Mizar was happy to go along with my idea. Then from now on it was alchemist time. Since it wouldn't be any fun for anyone else, I thought Aries and the others should wait outside. With that in mind, I ordered everyone to leave.

Noooww, then... What kind of fun weapon should we make?

*

*

Yeah. I'm tired.

I repaired all the broken golems, as well as the three mass-produced Libras that were still standing. Then after that, I used the permanently busted mass-produced Libras' parts to make a weapon. Still, with Mizar's knowledge, I had managed to make something much better than I'd expected. I suppose that'd only be natural for Mizar, though. Well, I wouldn't know how good the weapon actually was until it had been used, though.

"Let's go give it a test run first."

"Yes, master."

The new weapon I ended up making wasn't *technically* a weapon. More accurately, it was a "weapon-type" golem that was autonomous to some extent. Basically, it was something similar to Tanaka. Its most defining feature was that it would respond to Libra's call and rush to her from anywhere.

In order to test its capabilities, Libra and I had come to a deserted place outside of Blutgang. I'd confirmed there was no one near the rocky mountain that would be our target, which was one kilometer or so off in the distance. I'd had to. If anyone got killed there by accident, a "sorry" just wouldn't cut it.

"Then I will start..." Libra raised her voice and shouted, "Armament Selection: Astraia!"

The golem port in Blutgang immediately opened, and a set of steel wings came flying out. The object, which resembled a small plane, rotated in the air a bit before stopping directly above Libra and transforming. At the same time, Libra jumped, and lines of red light connected the two golems. Then, the two golems approached each other as if magnetically drawn together before the Astraia golem docked onto Libra's back.

Once that was done, two large cannons deployed over Libra's shoulders, facing forward. Each of those cannons were copies of Libra's right scale, Zuben El Genubi, which had only existed in her right arm up until now. By equipping Astraia, Libra effectively tripled her attack power.

On top of that, there were a further two cannons deployed at either side of her waist. This method of powering her up was far away from the usual fantasy rules and relied on pure firepower. However, that firepower could turn any fortress to ash with just one salvo.

Lastly, Astraia's wings split, turning into three steel wings on each side of Libra's back.

This was the new form of the fully autonomous killer maid Libra. I named it "Super Libra." *Or maybe "Astra Libra" would be better?*



The superpowered Libra deployed her right arm's cannon and aimed all five of her weapons—her three electromagnetic cannons on her arm and shoulders, and her two anti-fortress cannons on her waist—locking them all on the rocky mountain that was her target.

“Maximum power... All cannons concentrate on one point... Fire!”

For a single moment, my vision was turned pure white.

Three rounds accelerated by electromagnetism and two rounds propelled by gunpowder flew in a straight line, accurately impacting the poor, innocent rocky mountain, turning it into a pillar of fire which erased everything within it from the face of the world.

“...”

Yeahhh, uhhhh... Crap.

By my estimation, the results would be catastrophic, even with Blutgang as the target. While it probably wouldn't destroy Blutgang in one salvo, it'd probably still pierce through and completely mess up the insides. It might even instantly evaporate Levia.

Of course it would. After all, there were a couple conventional cannons on top of all the firepower three Zuben El Genubi's brought to the table. If this were a game, would this be a five-hit attack? It was so powerful that I was left seriously pondering whether even Karkinos could survive it.

The rest of my companions were all staring at me with exasperated expressions, and all I could do was avert my gaze.

I-I couldn't help it... Any guy who gets hooked on stuff like this would want to make one... We're all romantics for this sort of thing...

Still, I had no choice but to accept that this was too much firepower. Like, Libra could one-shot all the Seven Luminaries at once with that attack just now.

When Libra once again descended to the ground, she gave me a bow. “What wonderful power, master. With this, I will be able to lay waste to any enemy.”

“I-Indeed.”

“Thank you very much for granting one such as me a weapon. By the way, master...”

“Hmm? What is it?”

Libra was looking at me with upturned eyes. Normally, this wouldn't happen, because we were very similar in height. When I looked closer, I noticed that Libra was standing on slightly lower ground than I was. It seemed to be a clearly calculated move.

“Where is the enemy I should use this on? Or should I ask, when will we encounter this enemy?”

Faced with that question and Libra's undoubtedly excited tone, despite being outwardly expressionless, I instantly decided to seal

Astraia away. *At the very least, I've got to make it so that she won't be able to use it without my permission.* I didn't really have a right to talk, since I was the one who'd made Astraia, but Libra was the type of person who should never have been given heavy firepower.

3

Far above in the skies of Mizgarz, someone flew close to the stratosphere, even higher than the peaks of Vanaheim. He had blue skin and golden eyes. His black hair reached down his back, and his pitch-black cloak signified to the world that he was the king of devils. Behind him was an army of high-level monsters, all of whom tirelessly followed the Devil King's orders.

The Devil King Orm had a goal and was single-mindedly flying around the skies looking for "it."

It had been one week since he'd started his quest. He had heard that what he was looking for was around here, but since it was constantly moving, it was very hard to get hold of, even for the Devil King. His efforts had been worth it, though. The thing he'd been searching for was currently right in front of his eyes.

"Found you," Orm muttered, looking up.

He was looking at a ship. More specifically, he was looking at the top of the mast of the ship, which had gigantic wings sprouting out of it as it flew through the sky. There, a single man stood. His bright, golden hair shone in the sunlight and was styled slightly spiked. His face managed to maintain manliness while still giving off a feeling of delicate sensitivity. His muscular body probably stood over 180 cm tall. Coupled with his beautiful features, he looked amazing just standing there. One of his eyes was hidden under an eyepatch, and his outfit screamed "I am a pirate!" He wore a white coat which was decorated with an emblem emblazoned with a black wing on the back.

His name was Castor. He was also known as one of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars, Gemini of the Twins.

"So you came... I learned that you were searching for us a couple days ago. What do you want, Devil King?"

"Castor... I have no business with you. What I want is the treasure hidden within the ship."

Castor didn't flinch or fall back even one step in the face of the Devil King, but Orm also never stopped smiling his fearless smile. The situation was reaching critical mass. Both sides maintained their composure, though, as if both sides knew they would win if it came down to a fight. Even so, neither let down their guard.

"I see. So you're after the treasure. If that's the case, want me to give it to you?"

“No, no. Unfortunately, what I’m after isn’t anything that I can exchange for money. I want the key that will allow me to reach the heavens.”

“Now *that* would be impossible. The only one who will be reaching the heavens is my one and only master. Not you.”

“So you insist on staying under Alcor, huh? You and your little sister... I suppose that’s all you’ll amount to.” Orm laughed tauntingly, but Castor coolly refused to take the bait.

They were first playing a game of verbal dodgeball.

“True, I am Lufas’s subordinate. I won’t deny that I am her loyal servant. I have no memory of ever having to answer to you, King of Devils.”

“Oh? Are you implying that I come up short against the Twelve Heavenly Stars? Now, that hurts my pride. I’m very sensitive, you know.”

“Well then, I apologize. Unfortunately, I’m rather honest and blunt. I’ll only tell you the truth.”

Neither of their smiles held any enmity. In fact, their smiles were so clear they almost seemed refreshing. If one didn’t pay attention to what they were saying, it might have seemed as if they were two good friends reminiscing or something. But the words they unleashed were like poison, and they both dodged the storm of barbed words in order to throw their own.

“Oh my... Would you like to test that?”

“I don’t recommend it. I don’t like fighting battles where the conclusion is obvious.” Orm narrowed his eyes tauntingly, and his surroundings started to waver as if they were just a mirage.

At the same time, Castor picked up his weapon, an anchor.

Anchors were normally used to stop boats, but this one was the size a human could hold, long enough to be akin to a spear. It might be more accurate to say it was a spear shaped like an anchor rather than being a real anchor. Even if its size was something a human could wield, its weight was an entirely different matter. The anchor was heavy enough that simply dropping it would crack the earth, but Castor lifted it easily as he jumped off of his beloved ship, the *Argo*.

Castor stopped in midair, facing Orm. “But if you’re going to come at me, then I’m not going to let that go unanswered. You’re gonna have to be prepared to get burned if you want it.”

“So all I’ll get is a burn? How kind.”

“It’s still a burn if you’re only ash.”

One flash. Two.

Castor swung his anchor so fast that the sound of his swing had to catch up. Those attacks, which caused gale winds, were aimed straight at Orm. Orm blocked them with his bare arm before unleashing some

compressed mana from his palm. Castor easily spun his anchor and deflected the compressed mana before throwing out another large swing.

“Wind!”

The swung anchor conjured a blade of wind. While this was the same kind of Wood-element attack Jupiter had used, its strength and scope were far removed from what that member of the Seven Luminaries could achieve. It was a great invisible blade that could bisect a small island. If it hit, even Libra would be hurt.

Even that Orm defended against with only a single hand. Orm then rushed Castor and threw out a kick, the aftershocks of which managed to leave a wound on Castor’s cheek.

“Heh. I already knew this, but you really are stronger.”

The skirmish only lasted a scant few seconds, but Castor had already gotten a pretty accurate sense of the difference in their power levels. As he’d expected, Orm was stronger. Castor wasn’t sure he’d be able to win, even if he bent over backward for it.

But he’d already expected this, and he’d planned for it. There was nothing for Castor to be worried about.

Castor’s true strength wasn’t in one-on-one fights in the first place. As an individual, Castor lost out to the likes of Leon and Libra. Even so, he never doubted that he could bring to bear the greatest strength among all the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars. Fighting wasn’t just all about the individual. The overall strength of the group, or “army,” was what truly counted.

Castor raised his right hand into the sky. It served as a signal, and dozens of human forms gathered on the *Argo*’s deck. Each one of them had the aura of a strong fighter, and they all waited with an imposing air for the command to sortie.

Orm’s composure disappeared, a grim expression on his face.

“Argonautai, my comrades! Show me your power! Our great enemy is right here!”

Castor gave the order. Instantly, the heroes identified as the “Argonautai” jumped.

They numbered in the triple digits, and every single one of them was over level 500. In fact, the strongest of them were level 1000, even surpassing Castor in level. They were all survivors of the great war two hundred years ago. Actually, they hadn’t exactly “survived.”

They had all undoubtedly died before. They were all ancient heroes who’d sided with Lufas during that battle. Even after having been defeated and losing their lives, they’d managed to be reborn thanks to a fairy and were all still warriors who’d pledged loyalty to their black-winged lord.

A small fraction of the dead didn’t ascend to the afterlife but

instead remained in the world. They became ghosts, walking corpses, or some sort of other monster. But an even smaller fraction of them, the ones with the strongest souls, had managed to retain their reason and nobility to become “heroic spirits.”

Castor’s little sister, Pollux—the other half of Gemini as well as the Fairy Princess—had the ability to use mana to grant heroic spirits temporary bodies and essentially revive them. The skill, which essentially made her a personal army, was named “Argonautai.” While the skill was basically cheating, Pollux herself had no combat power and no leadership ability. That was why her older brother, Castor, was the one leading them.

In other words, the skill was only successful when the two of them worked as one. That was the true power of the Argonautai skill.

“Pay close attention, Devil King! This is our power and our bond! This is the Fairy Princess’s sword, the black-winged army led by me, Castor!”

In perfect timing with Castor’s shout, the heroic spirits all attacked at once.

Orm’s magic bullet was completely defended against by a priest’s shield. A swordmaster’s blade cut into a monster that followed Orm. A grappler’s fist blew another monster away. An alchemist transmuted blades through which it created a storm, and another alchemist transmuted a giant golem which crushed several monsters all at once.

The power of those from two hundred years ago was tremendous. Each and every one of them could have been substituted for an army of thousands. Each was basically an entire national army unto themselves.

Since the skill was canceled when not in combat, the Argonautai’s Monster Tamers and alchemists couldn’t use their skills to grow the army’s strength. Even so, the Argonautai could be considered Mizgarz’s strongest army. Even the Devil King knew of its power. That was exactly why he’d taken his army of monsters with him.

But their strength was just different! The monster army, which was certainly not weak, was getting steadily and one-sidedly destroyed!

“You are certainly strong, Devil King. As an individual, you probably rival my lord. Your monsters as well. They’re not weak. But that’s all.”

As lone units, the monster army wasn’t inferior, but the fight was still one-sided. The monsters were indeed grouped together, but they were no army. No matter how far you tried to stretch the definition, they were simply a “herd.” The monsters had no teamwork, and with one hundred monsters there would be one hundred individual fights.

But the heroic spirits were different. Even with one hundred of

them, they fought as one. All one hundred of their powers converged, and they used their perfectly synced movements and loyalty of steel to face their enemies. Each one of them relied on the other in battle. They encouraged each other and inspired bravery among themselves in order to face strong opponents. With the Argonautai, one plus one was not two. It was ten, or even one hundred. That was why they were an army. They were the definition of united.

“You and your horde that knows nothing but straightforward clashes have no chance against us, who have united under Lufas Maphaahl’s banner! As a leader, you are far outmatched by our lord!”

Castor veritably slid through the air and slammed his weapon at Orm.

Orm’s arms and Castor’s anchor clashed several times, each accompanied by a shower of sparks. Orm’s black cloak flapped in the wind, and Castor’s white coat similarly billowed. Both men were like comets, speeding through the skies and clashing over and over. If the one-on-one battle continued, Orm would probably win.

A strider jumped in to help Castor, managing a shallow cut on Orm’s wrist while a sorcerer’s magic engulfed him.

“This is the end, Devil King! Scatter, heroes! This last hit will finish it!”

The heroic spirits heeded Castor’s orders and retreated all at once. Then, Castor unleashed the greatest Wood element attack spell he could manage. A storm was conjured, lightning struck, and behind Castor appeared the majestic, shining forms of fifty giant gods.

In this world, the one true god was Alovenus, but religion would always branch off and splinter depending on the times and the area, so the gods born from humanity’s imagination were endless. These conjured forms were all apparitions of gods that had been buried in the darkness of history in Alovenus’s name, their religions brought low as heretical cults, and their worshipers possibly even thrown to the demons. It was a summoning.

“Gods of Fifty Names!” With Castor’s cry, the fifty false gods attacked at once.

There was a main god of a mythos born from human imagination. There was also a war god and a god of the underworld. There was even a half-deity, one with human blood. Some false gods breathed fire, and some attacked with their fists. They brewed up storms, caused lightning to strike, and used their divine brilliance in other ways to trample the enemy.

Eventually, their attacks finished, and not a single monster was left standing. As for Orm, he was no longer there.

“So it’s over.”

Castor, who’d still been floating in the sky, dropped to the ground,

exhausted, and looked around at the monsters. Those who had lost their lives would eventually return to the earth and dissolve into mana, which would circulate the world.

I've somehow managed to protect that which my little sister left me.

For two hundred years after his lord and master was defeated, Castor had been safeguarding this item using his ship and heroic spirits. It was a key to reach the heavens, which, if used incorrectly, could destroy the world. There was no way he could allow it to fall into the hands of the devilfolk. It was for his lord who would eventually return and her only.

While his little sister didn't have any combat power herself, she was the Fairy Princess and possessed a mysterious ability. It had been she herself who'd told Castor that their master would one day return.

So, Castor had been ordered to protect the key. That was two hundred years ago.

I can only lead armies and fight, but my little sister definitely sees what will happen in the future. Either that, or our lord gave her an order before that battle.

That was why Castor was still here. He believed in his lord and his little sister, so he had continued to fight for two hundred straight years.

"Now then, I should move the ship before the next challengers come."

Convinced of his victory, Castor made to return to the ship.

That's when it happened. Suddenly, a black flash parted the clouds and sliced through the ship.

"What?!"

There was someone left?!

While being forced to watch his smoking ship sink, Castor readied his anchor and turned around. His heroic spirits also prepared for battle, each one readying their weapons. That was when they saw their enemy. It was big—too big—and it writhed beyond the smoke and clouds.

"Wha— What...?! Th-That's...? No way... That's impossible...!"

Just how long is it?! One kilometer? No.

Ten kilometers? No!

Its form was way too large and way too long... Long enough to wrap around all of Mizgarz...

The huge shadow pierced through the clouds to show its face, giving the heroic spirits a large dose of fear.

"W-Waaaaaaarrrrgghhh?!"

As an army, they had certainly won. Orm's horde had been completely destroyed, but they weren't aware... They didn't know that some truly unfair and unimaginable beings existed in this world, or

that devastatingly powerful individuals who could overwhelm entire armies existed. But they realized that fact today, just as they realized the real reason why the Seven Heroes had been defeated two hundred years ago...

4

We left Blutgang under the dwarves's watch the day after I'd made the very foolish mistake of powering Libra up when she had needed nothing of the sort. Or rather...they sent us off. To be honest, I wanted to relax in Blutgang a little longer, but Scorpius was with us. I couldn't very well have a country accommodate their aggressor for so long, so we had to leave quickly. The fact that they'd even let us stay for a full day was a huge favor. Normally, I'd expect to be rejected immediately.

As for Scorpius herself, she'd been almost surgically attached to my arm ever since she'd woken up.

I can feel you pressing your chest into my arm, but you realize that won't work, right? We're the same gender. Though I'm a guy on the inside.

Well, personally, I was fine with this as long as Scorpius was happy, since she'd been left alone so long that she'd gone berserk. This didn't seem to fly with the other Twelve Heavenly Stars outside of Virgo, and the stares I could sense behind me were a little painful. Aries seemed unhappy, and Aigokeros was glaring so many daggers I could swear he was trying to curse someone to death. Libra had a gun in her hands the entire time, too, while Karkinos lamented loudly, "M E was only recently reunited with her toooooo!"

Our group was getting more and more chaotic, but Tanaka still drove along like normal today. Our next goal was to find Eros, or Pisces. We'd heard about him from Mizar. However, there was one problem. Neither Mizar nor we knew where Pisces was, not even Dina.

Hmm. What should we do about this?

"Aahhh, your expression while you're deep in thought is wonderful too, Lady Lufas!" Scorpius said before tangling herself even further on my arm.

I don't really mind, but please stop talking into my ear. It tickles.

Libra must have figured out what I was thinking, since she took her literal steel arm and grabbed Scorpius's head to peel her off of me.

"Hey, that hurts! What do you think you're doing?!"

"You will stop this now, Scorpius. I understand that you are happy to be reunited, but you are causing our master trouble. I will not allow you to continue on like this."

"Ha! And why do I need your permission to nurture Lady Lufas's and my love? If you keep on going, I'll be happy to turn you into scrap just like I did with your little sisters, you know?"

“I strongly advise that you stop this. If it comes to a fight, you will be the one reduced to pieces.”

Sparks flew between Scorpius and Libra as they started a glaring contest with me in the middle.

Aries was panicking, unsure of what to do, while Aigokeros rolled up his sleeves, clearly wanting to jump in and participate. Karkinos showed no signs of stopping them. In fact, he was smiling excitedly while egging them on. Meanwhile, Virgo had already retreated to a place where she wouldn't immediately become a casualty. As for Dina, she perfectly blended herself into the background.

“I have not!”

Okay, so “background” was just a joke. In reality, she was just sipping on tea in the corner, not minding any of this.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere surrounding Libra and Scorpius had gotten even more dangerous. Eventually, Scorpius's hair started moving and pointed its tip straight at Libra. In response, Libra clenched her fist. The situation was about to explode.

Realizing how dangerous things were, I decided to step in between them myself. “Stop. Do you want to destroy Tanaka?”

“Mm... It seems your life has been saved, Scorpius.”

“You mean yours. Right, Libra?”

Somehow, I'd managed to stop their fight before it started, but they were still glaring at each other. *Wow. These two don't get along well.* Aries and Aigokeros were quite friendly, but it seemed like not all of the Twelve Heavenly Stars got along, given the relationship between these two. *Well, I suppose there had to be at least one.*

For now, I decided to take the opportunity to check Scorpius's stats.

【Twelve Heavenly Stars: Scorpius】

【Level】 : 800

【Race】 : Emperor Berserk Scorpion

【Attribute】 : Fire

【HP】 : 90000

【SP】 : 8000

【STR (Strength)】 : 4800

【DEX (Dexterity)】 : 3105

【VIT (Vitality)】 : 6570

【INT (Intelligence)】 : 2100

【AGI (Agility)】 : 3800

【MND (Mind)】 : 3300

【LUK (Luck)】 : 5500

Oh, she's back to level 800. So, like, did she go back because the

Goddess's influence is gone? Or is it because her hatred disappeared after reuniting with me? It's gotta be one of those.

At any rate, Scorpius's HP had gone down because she'd lost some of her levels, and she'd become unable to withstand Brachium anymore. *Yeah. Libra was right. If they fought, Libra'd win. Actually, it's kind of unfair that she wins against both Scorpius and Aries, who she should have an elemental-type disadvantage to.*

I was once again made to recognize how ridiculously powerful Brachium was. Just that single skill made Libra a top candidate for the strongest, though I suppose that was only natural.

However, Scorpius was also the same in the respect that stats didn't tell her true strength. Her bread and butter lay in poison attacks, so in extreme terms her stats weren't all that high. On top of that, her ATK stat had been boosted by Berserk in addition to the extra levels when we'd fought, so her stats right now seemed like they belonged to a completely different person. Scorpius also had high LUK, so she critted often. Without Brachium, Scorpius would probably defeat Libra.

I guess the most fearsome one of all is the Goddess for being able to power-up Scorpius until she could tank Brachium and beat Libra. The Seven Heroes got the same power-up two hundred years ago; of course I wasn't able to win.

"So, Miss Lufas, what do we do now?"

"For now, We have no choice but to focus on those whose locations We know. If We remember correctly, there should be Stars in Alfheim, Helheim, and Muspelheim."

Out of those three, Alfheim should be the easiest to get to.

Alfheim, otherwise known as the fairy paradise, was actually inside humanity's sphere of influence and was the closest geographically. On the other hand, Muspelheim was outside of humanity's sphere, and Helheim was underground. Most importantly, Gemini of the Twins was in Alfheim. They were a unit of two people, which meant we'd get two people stronger when I got them back.

While I considered the situation, Tanaka suddenly stopped, cutting my ponderings short. *What happened? It's rare for Tanaka to stop by itself.*

"We stopped. What happened?"

"What's wrong, Tanaka? Did something happen?"

"Y E S, B O S S."

I looked out the front window. A huge crowd of people was around a kilometer ahead of us. It didn't seem like they'd noticed us, but a steady stream of beastfolk, humans, elves, and others were all heading towards the same place. Looking up at the sky, I even saw heaven-winged heading for the spot. It was obvious that they'd come

for some sort of shared purpose.

“Dina, is something happening up ahead?”

“Uh, given this area and their direction... Ah, it’s Draupnir.”

“The beastfolk country? But there are other races here too.”

Dina only cocked her head and hummed in reply to my question. Apparently she wasn’t sure either.

Scorpius stepped up in exchange. “Ah, that’s because the country is holding a hunting festival nearby, my lady. It’s a truly meaningless contest of strength between a bunch of nobodies. Monster Tamers release a bunch of monsters at once, and people compete to see who can hunt the most.”

“Oh? It’s surprising you knew about this.”

“Yes, well... After I destroyed Blutgang, I was planning to use this hunting festival to spread monsters throughout this country to attack it.”

“Oh...”

Damn. It’s seriously a good thing we managed to get Scorpius back when we did. If I hadn’t, she might have pulled off the worst hat trick ever and destroyed not only Hrotti but Blutgang and Draupnir too.

Scorpius wrapped herself around my arm as if she weren’t feeling any guilt over it. *She probably wasn’t, actually.* When she looked up from that position, she happened to see Dina. “By the way, who’s the blue one? And also that white one.”

“Now?!”

“The girl with the white wings is Virgo. She’s inherited the position of Maiden in the Twelve Heavenly Stars. Parthenos is dead, you see. The blue one is Dina Sceneria, the ‘Background.’”

“Hey, wait a second! Don’t just casually slip in those lies, Libra! I don’t have any such family name!”

“Did we have a ‘Background’ Star? Well, whatever. Nice to meet you, Background.”

“Please stop calling me that!” Dina looked over at me, half in tears.

I clearly understood from that look that she was silently begging me to do something. A beautiful girl’s tears were a powerful thing that aroused a protective desire, but even more powerful was my mysterious desire to tease Dina. So I decided to do something...

“Yes, it’s true that a shining star can’t be in the background. So why not be the space that brings out a Star’s shine...? A background is also necessary for a tale of conquest...”

“Miss Lufas?!”

“Oh, isn’t that great, Background? In a sense, you’re more important than us Stars, you know? You’re space itself.”

“But I’m not happy at all!”

It was about time for her half-in-tears to become full-on tears, so I decided to stop the teasing there. Well, it did seem like Scorpius had actually just misunderstood.

“Still, a hunting festival...”

To be completely honest, the festival held absolutely no interest for me. It felt kind of self-aggrandizing, but Scorpius was right. At our level, a festival like this was not worth it. It was kind of like a no-life gamer who’d perfected a game watching newbies diligently grinding. Honestly, if I had time to waste on the festival, it’d be put to better use just going around trying to find and loot items. I didn’t even have an ounce of desire to participate.

I didn’t know how big Draupnir was, but with my speed, it wasn’t impossible for me to go around the entire capital and clean up all the monsters myself. The same went for the rest of my party. If any of them participated, I could just see the overkill in the near future. But I was still considering allowing that overkill to happen.

“This seems like a worthy distraction. Virgo, you participate.”

“Huh? Me?!”

Virgo was the lowest leveled of all of us. Even then, she was still level 300—an incredible amount of strength for this current era. It would still be overkill for this event, but I wanted her to build some confidence, even though I felt a little guilty towards the other participants.

Virgo herself probably hadn’t realized just how strong she was. After all, she’d spent her entire life holed up in a forest being raised by Parthenos, and when she finally left, she was surrounded by the Twelve Heavenly Stars. She had completely gotten it into her head that she was weak.

There was a saying that went “a frog in a well knows nothing of the ocean.” Originally, this was meant to say that a frog, or person, who was proud to know everything in their little well of a world didn’t know of anything beyond it, like the wide ocean. Nothing in that saying specified how big the well was, though. That frog could very well have been a monster over a meter in size. However, the frog in the well still didn’t have any means to realize just how big and how strong it was.

This applied to Virgo perfectly. I needed to get weak frogs from outside the well lined up in front of her to show her just how strong she was. I didn’t want her to get full of herself. But at the very least, I wanted her to start having enough self-confidence to match her strength. In my mind, that was one of the duties given to me when Parthenos entrusted me with her child.

“You wish to win the hunting festival, Lady Lufas? Then leave it to me. I’ll soak all the monsters and the other participants in poison.”

“If you allow me the honor, I can make all the beastfolk and the entire capital sink into the depths of fear and despair...”

“My Brachium will cover the entire capital...”

“Uh, I can use my Mesarthim constantly and...”

“Wh-What?! Then I’ll slam a Morning Venus into the capital...”

“N O O O?! It’s only M E who doesn’t have a large-scale attack?! I can’t win!”

“All of you are barred from entering.”

Why the hell are you guys trying to one-up each other in violence? You know that the capital isn’t a monster, right? And that if you bring down the capital, we can’t win?

“Well, anyway... These fools don’t need to enter. You’ll be more than enough to win without them.”

“Um, but I don’t have any large-scale attacks like they do...”

“And that’s why they don’t need to participate. A hunting festival doesn’t call for that sort of thing in the first place.”

Thanks to the idiots’ weird contest, Virgo was barreling headlong into a misunderstanding, so I made sure to correct it. A hunting festival was a race to see who could hunt the most monsters the quickest. It wasn’t a place to indiscriminately fire large-scale attack skills. Though I was guilty of doing just that in the game when friendly fire was off...

I pat Virgo’s head. “How about it?” I’d like her to use this opportunity to gain some confidence. That was the truth. It was too sad that she severely underestimated herself and blinded herself to all her talent and ability because she was surrounded by such monsters.

“Okay. Then... I’d like to try.”

“Good. Take it easy. Don’t feel too pressured to win.”

With that, Virgo’s participation was decided. All we needed to do was head to Draupnir.

I gave Tanaka orders to change course.



What do you usually imagine when hearing the word “capital”? Wouldn’t the first thing be a huge castle surrounded by the roofs of houses in a castle town? All the places we’d been until now—Laevateinn, Svel, and Gjallarhorn—all had that in common, though the particulars were all different. Blutgang was basically a gigantic castle itself, so it was an exception...

Well, most people would imagine a capital in an RPG setting to be a western town from the Middle Ages with a castle plopped down in the middle. *That’s what I think of, at least.* Basically, it’s a trope. All fantasy RPGs were fundamentally built on Western culture. There was an Eastern one every once in a while, though. They’d be obvious about it from the very start, with yokai or oni instead of monsters, among other things. At the very least, all the concepts of monsters, magic, swords, heroes, and a demon king were all united under Western RPG sensibilities.

At any rate, reality was... Like, if someone woke you up by saying “Now awaken, hero,” and you were a sword-wielding hero, but you picked up your sword and went outside to see a townscape straight out of Old Edo... Like, that’d be weird, right? It’d just feel wrong, right? I mean, how would you feel if you were sent on a quest to defeat the Demon King and needed to go to the king’s castle, but the castle looked like Osaka Castle and the king had a topknot and wore a kimono? what if the hero also had a topknot, wore a kimono, and talked like an old-timey samurai... It’d be weird, right?

Then, the Demon King would be, like, “Why do you struggle to close your borders so? Cultural exchange is a joy, and Western culture is the most beautiful thing. Now come. Be swallowed by my culture and modernize!”

That’d be awful, right? It’d be really weird. At the very least, I’d refuse to play it.

Well, I hadn’t encountered an Eastern-style town yet, as expected. This was also a trope in RPGs where there’d inexplicably be a Japanese-style country named Zipang or “Eastern Country” or something in the Eastern region for some reason. That didn’t seem to exist in this world, though.

Katanas did exist, though, so something like that might have existed in the past. After all, some of the countries players had set up in the game had basically been purely Japanese in culture. Well, they all disappeared when I’d conquered them, though.

Whoops, got off track.

The point I was trying to make was that when tasked with imagining a capital, people automatically think of a western town. But right now, the town I saw was as far from Western as you could get.

Wait... Is this actually the capital? Is this even a city in the first place?

Right now, the place we were standing could be summed up as grasslands. While the grass may have been trampled flat, it was still straight-up just grasslands. There weren't even any clear roads built so it was easier for people to pass through.

Tent-like buildings were set up here and there. *What are those called...? Those things that Mongols and other nomads used...? A yurt? Not real sure about that...*

There was a forest nearby, and it seemed as if there were more beastfolk living in there too.

"Just what are capitals?"

"Capitals are wherever the king is. Well, it seems like Draupnir has an Emperor, though, not a King. So instead of a kingdom's capital, this'd be an empire's capital."

"Oh? Emperor? How confident."

"Beastfolk have a much larger variety of peoples compared to other races. For example, among the heaven-winged you basically just have the white-winged and everyone else, but the beastfolk are different. There're felines and canines and horses and cows. There're even elephants and rabbits... If you start counting, there'd be no end to them. And even among the felines, there're cats, tigers, lions, panthers, cheetahs, and even more besides."

I nodded in understanding. "Hmm. So unlike the group the name beastfolk suggests, they're more like a bunch of finely separated species."

It was common knowledge that there were seven races of humanity in Mizgarz, but apparently the "beastfolk" were just a bunch of different races forced into a single category. It made sense, though. There was no way a lion beastfolk was the same as a rabbit beastfolk. The forest in this world had animals like tigers and bears living in it. If each of these different groups had counted as individual races, then the races of humanity would've easily cleared one hundred, and almost all of them would've been beastfolk.

Right, so that's why they combined them into one...

"They needed a ruler who could unite and rule over all these different beastfolk. That's why they used the higher-ranking title of emperor rather than king. Well, that's how they explain it, anyway."

"So, an emperor because they stand above many races? We see."

"Naming themselves above Lady Lufas? Above a king...? Absurd! Maybe I should fill this tiny, hackneyed country up with poison right now...!"

I was fine with Dina's exposition, but apparently Scorpius wasn't a fan. I hurriedly stuck out my hand to stop her, since she was already preparing for battle while spitting violent, poisonous words.

"Stop that, Scorpius. It's true that We are no ruler at the moment. It does not matter who names themselves what."

"Ahhh, yes, Lady Lufas! You're so tolerant and forgiving!" As soon as I stopped her, she immediately withdrew her murderous aura and once again stuck herself on my arm. With my specs I didn't really feel anything, but if I were normal, I was sure my arm would have been torn off long ago. I was scared to tell her to get off already, since I wasn't sure what she'd do if I said that.

Maybe I was a tad too hasty in recruiting her...?

"But Scorpius has a point. Miss Lufas is more fitting of being called an E m p e r o r, which stands above a K i n g, since she once managed to unite the world. What do you think, Miss Lufas? After we reunite all the Twelve Heavenly Stars, we can conquer the world once again so you can name yourself E M P E R O R!"

"That's a good idea for a crab. Then when that happens, why don't we rename ourselves? We can go from the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars to the Imperial Twelve Heavenly Stars!"

"Oh, that sounds cool!"

Behind me, a crab, a goat, and a sheep were getting excited over plans about me while ignoring my opinion.

How many times have I said that I don't care about world conquest anymore? Why do I have to retread the same path? You all realize that if I do that, I'll just end up in the Last Boss route again and get defeated by the hero?

Having to deal with the hero, the Devil King, and the Goddess's factions all at once is just impossible! The hero's weak right now, but he had really high class bonuses. If he ever got to level 1000, he'd be able to match us, you know? Seriously, calm down with those ridiculous cheat-powers.

Oh wait. I forgot about Benetnasch and Leon. I'd have to deal with five factions. Yep. Impossible.

"Well, We don't care much for that. More importantly, where do you apply for the hunting festival?"

"I think we can just follow everyone else for now."

"Then let's do that."

I followed Dina's suggestion and went with the flow.

This was just a small detail, but right now, I was using the full suspicious-person disguise, the cloak completely covering me. It was just in case, since there were elves and heaven-winged around at this festival too. There was no guarantee that no one here would remember my face.

Luckily, I didn't stand out too much thanks to the fact that there were so many travelers and adventurers streaming in from everywhere. Some of the adventurers around me had such eccentric appearances that even I wanted to question their choices out loud. Thanks to that, I was in the more sensible camp for once. More specifically, I could see some idiotic dude in bikini armor, among others. *Like, come on. That's just suspect no matter how good the stats are... It's true that you can put on women's armor if you really want to, since this isn't the game, but...*

"Miss Lufas, that..." Virgo pointed out the bikini armor guy, but I quickly blocked her view.

"Don't look."

You can't look at perverts like that. You'll ruin your eyesight.

"Still, there really are all kinds of beastfolk, aren't there? It's amazing that Dubhe managed to unite all these people."

It was once again impressed upon me just how many different beastfolk there were as I looked around. The more I looked, the more varieties I saw, from the obvious dogs and cats, to even lizardmen and other reptilian types. It was surprising that they also counted as beastfolk. I also confirmed people who basically looked like regular humans with just ears and/or tails stuck on. Were they half-beastfolk?

There were a couple demerits to it at first glance, though. If the half-beastfolk was a guy or had a less-than-ideal face, the animal parts just wouldn't fit. Like, just who would want a bearded old dude with rabbit ears? Was he gonna leap through the air while saying "Mamma mia," or something?

"If I may, you shouldn't expect much of these empty-headed livestock. I can say this for sure, since they were stupid enough to destroy you and take over your rule."

I was simply impressed by Dubhe's achievements, but Libra was much more critical. *You really are completely ruthless to all the Seven Heroes other than Mizar, aren't you?*

"Oh, that looks like a line. Let's go."

"That looks like our destination."

As we followed the stream of people, we eventually found a line with all sorts of travelers in it. The front capped at some sort of reception-like setup, so it seemed to be what we had been looking for.

We got in the back of the line and waited for our turn.

*

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"Okay, your registration is complete. The hunting festival starts tomorrow, so please rest as you like until then." The receptionist handed over a numbered plate, and Sei, who'd successfully registered, stored the plate in his pocket with a nervous expression.

The hero party had come to Draupnir in search of more information after the events in Svel. Thanks to the hunting festival, all sorts of travelers, adventurers, and merchants were gathered here during this time. Hoping to catch some people who might know of Lufas's whereabouts, Sei and the others had decided to come and test Sei's strength using the festival at the same time.

This place also happened to be the birthplace of the party's strongest member, the Sword Saint Friedrich. After deciding to meet and talk with Lufas, the others in the party decided that coming back home might lift Friedrich's spirits, since he'd become as quiet as a housecat after certain events.

"There're so many different people around, aren't there?" Sei said curiously as he looked around at all the people who'd traveled here.

There were hardened warriors shelled in full armor as well as women who were dressed like dancers. There were bearded old men with rabbit ears and knights dressed all in black, probably because the knight himself thought it was cool. Lastly, Sei noticed a pervert, a muscular guy wearing women's bikini armor.

"There really are all kinds... Are all adventurers like that?"

Sei sounded completely creeped out, so Jean rushed to defend the other adventurers. "No, that's a pretty damn rare case. Please, don't lump us in with that."

At the moment, Sei and his party were split into two. Jean, Nick, and Shuu were with Sei as bodyguards while he registered for the hunting festival. The other half were running around collecting information. This party had Gantz, the tiger, Kross, Richard, and the vice-captain, who had recently grown two nose hairs which stuck out of her nostrils. The rangers that always followed them were diligently working to secure the entire party rooms at an inn.

"Oh! Look at that, Sei. That group's full of beauties. I'm so jealous of the guy that's with them."

Trying to change the subject, Jean pointed out a party that was in line. The party consisted of a clearly suspicious person completely covered in a cloak, a lewdly dressed bondage lady who was attached to the suspicious person's arm, a cute girl with pure-white wings, another cute girl with rainbow-colored hair who was standing next to her, an old gentleman in a black suit wearing a monocle, a handsome guy with a goatee in a red vest, a beautiful blue-haired girl, and a silent and stiff looking maid with brown hair.

What the hell...? That party barely looks like a party at all with how disparate they are.

Ah, the handsome guy in the red vest tried to get closer to the red cloak but got punched by the maid.

"It's a weird group, but they're high level. That lewd girlie with

the mean face... Oh man..."

"Y-Yeah, they're all so beautiful."

"Right? By the way, Sei, which one of them is your type?"

"Huh?! Wh-What do you mean? I-I don't have a type."

"Ha! Don't try to hide it. I bet it's... That one. You either like the white-winged girl or the one with rainbow hair. You like calm, collected girls, right?" Jean locked Sei in an arm-lock to force him to answer.

He's friendly and a really good guy, but this side of him is hard to deal with...

Something must have attracted Jean's attention as he released Sei and sunk into thought with a groan.

"Wh-What's wrong?"

"Hmm? Oh, nothing much. I just feel like I saw them somewhere before. But I'd never forget a party filled with beauties like that. Maybe it's just my imagination..." Jean tilted his head in confusion, but Sei figured it was just his imagination.

Sei'd never say it out loud, but Jean's memory wasn't very good. He'd even forget about an item that he'd obtained just a little while ago. Jean was also the type of guy who wouldn't care and just forged ahead. That was why Sei figured this was just some sort of memory thing.

"It's just your imagination. Come on, let's go."

"Maaan, I totally feel like I've met them somewhere... Where was it..." Jean still tilted his head this way and that, trying to knock something loose, so Sei had to drag him along to where they were having dinner.

The two parties were unbelievably close, but they would not yet meet.

6

After registering, we regrouped back at Tanaka and decided to spend the night there. I considered booking rooms at an inn, but inns here meant a tent, and I just couldn't imagine them being very comfortable. The tents were probably preferred by beastfolk sensibilities, but in my opinion, they'd make more money by considering what travelers would want.

Virgo, who was going to be the star tomorrow, went to bed early. Aries was already in dreamland. On a whim, I decided to exit Tanaka and catch some night air while my normally unused mind pondered this country's defenses.

Laevateinn had Alioth's barrier. Svel had Levia. Gjallarhorn had Merak and his Pressure. Lastly, Blutgang itself was a mobile fortress,

and it even had mass-produced Libras, which meant that this country should have its own defenses as well.

Now that I think about it, all this stuff has been working out for me so far. Maybe I should prepare for the possibility that I'll have to face all these defenses as enemies. To the people of this country, I wasn't too different from the devilfolk. I'd only be lumped in as a threat, just like them. This meant that there was a distinct possibility that whatever this country had as a defense would be pointed at me. I still didn't believe that I'd lose, but the real problem was if those defenses were pointed at Virgo.

With that in mind, I should devise a way to protect her. Now then... First, I should ask Dina for information whenever she's free. She's fishy as all hell, but the info she gives is at least ninety percent accurate.

"Master?"

I heard a voice from behind me. I knew who it was, even without turning around. I stayed as I was and called out to my subordinate. "Libra... What is it?"

"There is something I'd like to discuss with you, master," Libra said, walking up beside me.

Libra must have been much heavier than her appearance belied, but her light steps and movements told the exact opposite story. Looking at her from the side, Libra seemed to have a serious expression. *No, I guess she's always like that...* As always, her facial features were unchanging, but she spoke in a more serious tone than usual.

"I will not beat around the bush. Just what is that female named Dina? I have not restored my damaged data yet, but it is still easy for me to surmise that she was not there two hundred years ago."

"So you've noticed."

"Yes. I have also noticed that you have long realized this, master, and are hiding it from us."

I thought I'd been doing pretty good at hiding it, but apparently I was an open book to Libra. Well, the others aside, hiding it from Libra forever would've been impossible. I was a terrible actor, after all. And an idiot.

With a wry smile, I averted my gaze from my follower who wasn't even blaming me for keeping a secret. "Sorry."

"No need for that. I believe you had your own reasons for doing so, Master. But if I am to give you advice, I need to know your reasoning."

I glanced at Libra and sunk into thought.

Libra was probably the one I could trust the most right now, since she was immune to Dina's mental manipulation. In other words, whether it be the Goddess or Dina, neither of them could manipulate

her. Even if Libra attracted the onerous eyes of the Goddess, she had no way to control the golem. The worst-case scenario was that the “golems can’t be manipulated” fact was a lie, but by my reckoning, that wasn’t the case. If it were, there’d be no point to it, since it’d be faster to just take control of Libra and gain my trust rather than lie about it. The fact that hadn’t happened was basically proof that it was impossible.

“Hmm... Then We shall tell you. To be honest, We still have not figured out almost anything about her. She does seem to be one of the Seven Luminaries of the devilfolk, but there’s no way she’s one of the devilfolk herself, after all.”

“Agreed. Just the fact that she can use divine power means she is not a devilfolk or a vampire. But if that’s the case, what is she?”

“From what We can tell, there is no doubt that she has some sort of connection to the Goddess. Whether she is similar to Parthenos in that she used to serve the Goddess or if she is something even closer... She may be the Goddess herself, actually.”

At this point, I was basically certain. I was certain that Dina had some sort of relation to the Goddess. They were definitely connected under the surface somehow. I was sure the Goddess would be there once I’d unraveled Dina’s mysteries. What I didn’t know was the extent of their relationship. Was she simply like Parthenos, or something closer, like a right-hand-man or a close confidant? Or was she herself one of the Goddess’s avatars...? I still didn’t have enough information to make a call.

“Master, she is dangerous. I believe you should restrain her and interrogate her immediately.”

“Don’t be so rash. She’d just escape with teleportation. And once she did, we’d have no way of tracking her down.”

“So you plan to let her do as she pleases...?”

“Maybe. We might be the ones being allowed to do things. Either way, she is our only clue towards the Goddess at the moment. It would be rash to let her escape.”

It might have seemed as if I were in the palm of her hand, but there was one thing Dina didn’t know. And that was how much I’d “awakened.” That was something that would only ever be known to me myself. Once, she’d even asked me if I was really a player. Now that I thought about it, she’d probably been trying to gauge how far I’d returned. It was embarrassing to admit, but the original me never even thought to doubt Dina. Just the fact that I was thinking about this and pondering things at all meant that I was no longer just “me.”

On the other hand, that also meant the other side wouldn’t be able to tell just how much they were being suspected as long as I kept up my foolish facade. That was why I’d allowed this situation to go on. It

was better that I acted the part of a thoughtless optimist.

“Also, several unnatural points start to stand out if We assume that she’s a complete enemy.”

“Unnatural points?”

“Yeah. It’s true that Dina led us around and moved as she pleased. There’s no doubt in that. But... At present, none of those things have been bad for us. Based on how things have turned out, everything has been to our advantage. It’s inscrutable.”

If she’d only given a lot of positives and hidden the negative outcomes, then I’d have understood. That hadn’t been the case, though. There hadn’t been a single negative outcome to what she’d had us do. We’d reunited with Aries in Svel. We’d retrieved Libra in the King’s Grave. Gjallarhorn had seen Aigokeros come back to the fold, and both Karkinos and Scorpius had rejoined back in Blutgang. In each of the capitals, I’d also revived my relationships with the surviving Seven Heroes. *Everything has been good for me.*

Isn’t that weird? Lufas Maphaahl should be an enemy and eyesore to the Goddess, right? Isn’t that why she had me clash with the Seven Heroes two hundred years ago, which ended up with me sealed? Then why assist in restoring the power of the person you’d tried so hard to neutralize? I just can’t understand it.

This was the sticking point in my “Dina = the Goddess’s avatar” theory that I was already 90% sure about.

Don’t be hasty and make a mistake. Don’t cloud your eyes with meaningless doubt. Something inside me told me to calmly examine the information I had. I was still missing something.

“It’s hard to explain... We just feel like it’s a mistake to corner Dina at the moment.”

“Feel? That’s so uncertain.”

“We know. But please just give it some time.”

I wonder why this is? I’m not sure myself. Yet, I can’t help but think that it’s not yet time to confront Dina.

I’d already gathered pretty much all the parts, and the puzzle had taken shape. Even without the last bits, I was already at the stage where I could see the final state of the puzzle. But there was the possibility that the last pieces I was missing had some hidden image that would change everything. If I had to make an analogy, that would be it.

Libra was silent for a moment. “Understood. If that is what you wish, master, then I will follow it.”

“Sorry about this, Libra.”

“It is fine. I am your tool. My only purpose is to support the path you choose to take with all my ability. Even if you make a mistake, my role is to blast it away.”

“How reliable.”

I truly am blessed with reliable subordinates. They're so reliable that they'll just decimate everything in my path, though...

At any rate, it's gotten kind of cold. I guess I should go to sleep already.

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It was the day of the hunting festival.

A flare, which was probably some sort of magic or something, bloomed in the sky like a firework. Multitudes of different races were all sitting in spectator seats, waiting for the event to begin. There was no way even the spectator seats would be tents; instead it was more like an event space for a movie screening, with many chairs lined up together. In front of all the seats was a ridiculously large, screen-like setup, which everyone was watching.

This world shouldn't have cameras, right...? How are they going to project the image?

“Ah, that's called a manascreen. It's something Mizar made before he died. It can capture the image of a faraway place through the mana in the air and display it. Blutgang has a similar system which allows them to see what's going on outside from within the city, apparently. Well, that place has so many black boxes they're unable to create anything similar at the moment, though. It's rather unfortunate.”

Mizar again?

I looked up to the sky in exasperation as Dina spoke.

Why the hell is he the only one dragging Mizgarz's overall civilization level through the roof? Were you actually like a modern Japanese person? I seriously want to ask you that. I could only believe that he'd been born in the completely wrong time and world, being a “native” with absolutely no modern Japanese knowledge with this amount of skill.

“That beardo can do just about anything, can't he?”

Even while wallowing in exasperation, I beckoned Virgo over. It was about time for her to go, and if anything happened to her, I'd feel too guilty to face Parthenos. So, I'd decided to impart Virgo with a weapon I had Dina retrieve from my tower, even though it was probably overkill for a festival of this level. It was just a hand-me-down from when I was in mid-game, but it should still be plenty useful.

“What is this, Miss Lufas?”

“Something We used a long time ago. Its name is “La Pucelle,” and it can gather surrounding mana and expel it as divinely attributed magic. It's an effect that is both very useful and popular among the heaven-winged.”

The heaven-winged were unable to use magic, but as was standard

for games, weapons existed that could produce effects just like magic. The weapon I had handed to Virgo was one of those, and its rarity was rather high. It'd served me well from early- to mid-game. Well, by the time I was level 500, my normal attacks were stronger than any effect the weapon could produce, though, so I'd dumped it. However, it was still plenty strong enough for Virgo.

The problem was... In this world, the heaven-winged hated mana. In the game, that factoid had simply been background lore. That was why it'd been normal to see things like heaven-winged in Helheim, fighting full force and completely ignoring the lore. This weapon had been popular in the game.

In this world, the heaven-winged actually did hate mana, so if Virgo rejected the weapon, then I had a spare ready. In that case, I'd give her my favorite spear from back when I was around level 500, even if it was even more overkill than the sword. It seemed as if my fears were groundless, as Virgo looked at me with a smile like a blooming flower.

"Thank you very much, Miss Lufas! I'll make sure to win!"

Great. Looks like I hit the jackpot.

Behind me, Scorpius was emitting literal flames of jealousy, burning the grass around her, but I had no intention of giving her anything of mine. If I did, there'd be a real possibility of it being used for something weird.

Wait, Scorpius, stop actually emitting flames! You're causing trouble for everyone around us.

"Virgo, a sword is not enough firepower. Here, take my anti-golem cannon..."

"Stop that, Libra."

I wasn't sure if Libra was trying to compete with me or if she really did feel that Virgo didn't have enough firepower, but she tried to hand Virgo something that looked like a rocket launcher. I smacked Libra in the head to stop her.

Come on, that thing's more than just overkill. You'll destroy the entire venue! Wait. Actually, where did you even pull that thing out from?

"Be careful, Virgo! If you feel like you're in danger, call me right away! I'll come flying with Mesarthim!"

"I can sink all the participants into the depths of fear and make them powerless. Just say the word."

"Oh my... Then why not skip the middleman and poison them? Then you'll be able to win even easier, no?"

"Then M E will..."

Aries and the others all offered up incredibly violent support. Only Karkinos had nothing. After thinking about it for some time, he eventually clutched at his head.

“You’re slow, so you won’t make it even if you run full speed, Karkinos.”

“You cannot even make long-ranged attacks, nor do you have any support magic.”

“To be honest, you’re an incompetent who can only defend and counter.”

“Yeah... Do you have any role you can fulfill other than being a shield?”

“N O O O O O O?!”

Aries, Aigokeros, Scorpius, and Dina all unreservedly took huge stabs into Karkinos’s heart and self-esteem.

Hey, stop that. That might be true, but he’s the best shield in the entire Twelve Heavenly Stars, you know.

Ah... But he really can’t do anything other than that, can he?

7

There were only a few minutes left until the start of the hunting festival. Virgo clutched her sword, a nervous expression on her face as she waited along with the other participants for the event to start. All the people around her looked fierce and frightening, so she stuck out like a sore thumb. For example, there was a large, heavily muscled man equipped with a giant war ax, as well as a weirdo in all black who tried to put on airs by scoffing at others. There was also a brawler who had to be over two meters tall, and an incredibly obese guy only wearing a loincloth. One person looked like a knight in full armor and seemed strong at a glance.

“Now, it’s finally almost time to start Draupnir’s hunting festival! Let’s go over the rules once again! They’re simple: we’ll release monsters here, and all you’ll have to do is hunt, hunt, and hunt some more! That’s it! Each monster is worth points according to its strength, and the brave warrior with the most points at the end of the one-hour time limit wins! Ah, I’m sorry for the late introduction. I am your emcee, Chiron.”

Is he using some sort of magic or divine arts to enhance his voice?

The voice of the unknown person who’d introduced themselves as the emcee could be heard throughout the area. Virgo faced the emcee area and saw a slender man who looked like the very picture of a traveler. There was a tiger beastfolk next to him who looked really strong.

“For this event, our country’s pride and the continent’s strongest, the Sword Saint Friedrich, has come all the way here to be our commentator. Please, a word!”

“GRROOOAARRR!”

“Mizgarz Common is okay here, you know?”

The tiger’s rather *unique* joke had everyone busting a gut. It had to be an attempt to assuage everyone’s nerves. It would only be natural for the Sword Saint to know how to do such a thing.

“Okay! The time to start is finally upon us! Is everyone ready? Then take your marks... And starrrrrrtttt!” The emcee’s voice announcing the start of the hunting festival reverberated throughout the area. At the same time, a great explosive sound rang out, which was probably caused by some sort of magic.

All the participants sprinted forward. Virgo started running as well, desperate to keep up. She easily broke out to the front of the pack. It was only natural for her to think, *huh?* But her level and stats were just that different compared to everybody else.

Virgo continued running at the front even while looking behind her and wondering, *Are they all just holding back?*

Still, this event wasn’t a footrace. It was a contest to see who could hunt the most and the strongest monsters. The participants all scattered to the four winds, going where their intuition and experience took them, looking for places where monsters could easily gather.

In front of Virgo stood a monster that was over two meters tall with an expression that said it knew it was strong. It had a muscular body, green skin, and only wore a grass skirt. It was a type of demihuman called a hobgoblin.

“Gobgob!”

The hobgoblin probably underestimated Virgo, since she seemed weak at first glance. It slowly and casually sauntered towards her with a grin on its face. Meanwhile, Virgo didn’t have much confidence in her own strength.

They say that a frog in a well knows naught of the ocean, but the well Virgo was in was full of monsters that could completely decimate the entire ocean, so she had no actual gauge on her own strength. The reason why Virgo stood firm despite that was because of her superior’s expectations. There was no way she could do something as embarrassing as running away after having been given a sword.

“Yaahhhh!”

So, she charged, half in desperation! Virgo struck out with her sword and connected with the hobgoblin’s chest. The hobgoblin’s body gave almost no resistance and was easily pierced through. It didn’t even make a sound as it fell to the ground.

“Contestant number 760, Virgo, has earned eight points!”

“Huh?”

Virgo, dumbfounded that she’d won so easily, hesitantly poked at the hobgoblin’s corpse. It yielded no response. There was no sign of it

regenerating or anything; it really was dead. Seeing that, Virgo was finally convinced of her own victory.

Wait... Are all these monsters in the hunting festival just really weak?

Actually, the monsters weren't weak; she was just amazingly strong. But it seemed as if that hadn't crossed her mind just yet. However, if the monsters were weak, then Virgo had the confidence to be able to do something.

Virgo, with her slightly off misconception intact, stood and motivated herself. *I can do this! I can at least fight well enough that it won't be shameful, even if I don't win!*

Virgo flapped her pure-white wings and took to the skies. Flying wasn't in any way cheating. It was recognized as another skill or ability. Virgo searched for monsters from the air. After identifying a monkey-type monster that was closest to her, she locked on and accelerated. She strafed past it in a flash! The monkey monster was bisected, and Virgo once again rose into the sky.

"Contestant Virgo: six points!"

Next, she locked on to a bird monster. While it was a bit farther away, Virgo had the sword gifted to her by Lufas. She gathered power into La Pucelle and swung. A blade of light shot forth from the tip of the sword and bisected the distant bird monster.

"Contestant Virgo: seven points!"

Without reducing her speed, she next found some goblins that were frozen stiff. There were two normal goblins around 150 cm in height and wielding clubs. There was also one rarer goblin wielding a staff—a goblin magician—for a total of three.

Virgo accelerated sharply, charging into them and swinging her sword. In a single pass, she disposed of two goblins. As she flew away, the magician shot a fireball at her, but Virgo dodged to the side without even looking back. After gaining some altitude she inverted herself and shot another blade of light to bisect the magician.

"Contestant Virgo: twenty points!"

I can do this! I can win! Having come this far, Virgo finally started to think, *Maybe I'm a little strong...*

Then her friends and comrades immediately came to mind. Specifically, she started imagining a what-if scenario where one of them, such as Libra, had participated in this event. In Virgo's mental world, Libra would patrol the area with machine guns and bazookas in hand as the ground beneath her burned. She imagined Libra massacring monsters in droves while turning Draupnir into scorched, uninhabitable earth.

Ah, I was wrong. I really am weak. She still hadn't noticed that her objects of comparison were too far to one side of the scale.

Anyway, as one of Miss Lufas's comrades, I need to at least not

embarrass myself, Virgo thought as she flew through the air, not realizing that she was far and away first place in points.

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“Contestant Virgo: five points!”

“Contestant Virgo: nine points!”

“Contestant Virgo: eight points!”

Man, that girl's super strong.

The hero Sei shivered at the thought as he continued to fight and defeat monsters. He knew who Virgo, who was currently dominating the contest, was. He'd seen her yesterday. She was the cute, white-winged girl who'd been with the strange group. Even before the contest, her pure-white wings had stood out, as had her surprisingly nervous demeanor. Sei's sense of justice had burned brightly as he'd made a note to help her out if she were in danger. He'd had to remind himself not to bring ulterior motives into it. Sei was a man, too, after all.

But he'd been too naive. Rather, he'd been foolish and lovestruck.

Save? Who again...? That one there, who's been using hit-and-run tactics to easily poach monsters from the air? Surely you jest. That girl was far and away stronger than Sei himself. In fact, she was probably the strongest participant here.

Sei wondered just what her nervous appearance was for. Was it an act? It was basically a fantasy trope for someone weak-looking to turn out to be strong, but that was especially jarring with her. Sei figured she could even be stronger than the Sword Saint.

Sei shook away the idea; there was no way that was true, but the sight of her complete dominance over this event certainly made it seem plausible.



Ah, she killed a wyvern just now. Apparently they're weaker than real dragons. But still, that thing was over level 80!

As an aside, Sei's current level was 35. He was at the level where he could be easily one-shotted by Virgo. *It's so hard to level in this world. I want to cry!*

Shouldn't it be, like, way easier to level in cases like this? The main character in that light novel I read a long time ago leveled up super easily compared to everyone else. He had a mega-easy time. So what the hell is this? Like, what even is a hero?

"Contestant Virgo: twelve points!"

"Contestant Bunny Dandy: three points!"

"Contestant Bikini Muscle: seven points!"

One after another, the contestants' point gains were being called out, causing Sei to rush himself.

Crap. I can't even think about going for a high rank like this. I'll be sitting at the bottom.

Actually, Sei was working pretty hard and was currently holding on to a high-ranking spot by a hair, but he himself didn't know that.

Sei swung his sword as if possessed, continuing to defeat monsters. He was still resistant to taking lives. Some might feel exasperated at how long Sei had chosen to carry that particular cross, but it was a tall hurdle for a Japanese person. He even lost his will to fight at all against his current enemy, which was something like a cute puppy monster.

Hey, stop that. Don't come closer. I'm a dog lover! No, don't wag your tail at me! Don't stand up on your hind legs to try and play with me! Stop following me! Sei thought while fighting desperately when a scream from some distance away brought him back to reality.

"Wh-What was that?"

Is there a strong monster there?

Sei turned to face the direction the scream had come from. Then, he froze. There was something huge there, right in his line of sight. Several hundred meters ahead in some grassland was a dinosaur so large that Sei could see it clearly even at that distance. And it was on a rampage.

"A-An accident! An accident has happened! A dinosaur—a dinogigant—has wandered in from the nearby forest that was its territory! Please stay away from it, everyone. This is not one of the hunting festival's targets!"

This world has dinosaurs?!

Sei's face paled as he watched the rampaging dinosaur off in the distance. While he wasn't sure whether it was categorized as an animal or a monster, he did understand that the danger it represented

was incomparable to the hunting festival's monsters. After all, that thing was eating the monsters. Everything around it was fleeing. Even the wyvern had lost all will to fight. The scene of the dinosaur chasing them down was exactly that of a predator, something that reigned at the top of the food chain.

The biggest problem was that it considered humans food as well. No adventurers or travelers had become its victims yet, but it was only a matter of time. If someone didn't stop it, it was basically guaranteed that human lives would be lost. And unfortunately, there was a female adventurer who was probably a participant currently on the ground in front of the dinosaur, shivering like a leaf.

It's obvious she's in danger. If I don't do something, she'll get eaten.

"Dammit!" Sei spat before running towards the dinosaur. For some reason, the dog followed after him.

That dinosaur'll take a couple seconds at most to finish that monster it's eating. So in that time I'll need to get there, grab that girl adventurer, and drag her away. As if I'd fight that thing. I know how weak I am.

Sei knew full well that the best he could do was make sure no one died until some warriors or something were dispatched to kill it. As long as he bought enough time, Friedrich or Gantz should arrive. Sei was confident they'd be able to turn things around.

"Hey, we need to run! Get up!" Sei reached the woman and grabbed her hand, trying to pull her up. She didn't move other than to shake her head from side to side.

"I-I can't... My legs. They've given out..."

"Agggghh!"

Sei immediately decided to carry the woman, but it was no good. She was too heavy. Rather, it wasn't the woman herself but what she was wearing. Her sword was heavy too. There was no way Sei could pick all that up.

"Hey, drop your sword and armor! I can't carry you like this!"

"B-But this was expensive... I haven't even paid off the loans I took out to buy it."

"Is this the time for that?!"

Each second was precious. Sei knew they needed to run away before the dinogigant finished eating the monster it was working on. But it was already too late. The dinosaur swallowed the last of it and looked their way.

Sei knew it was too late to run now, so he readied his sword and tried to intimidate the dinosaur. The fact that he refused to abandon the woman and run even now showed his mettle as a man. Although, it seemed like the woman herself wasn't so noble, as she immediately tried to crawl away, leaving Sei behind.

"GIGAAAAAAAAA!"

The dinosaur howled and charged. It was fast and heavy.

Even though each step shakes the earth like this...what the hell is with that speed?!

Sei prepared himself, gripping his sword tightly as he tried to calmly observe how the dinosaur moved in order to avoid death.

I need to watch out for its mouth! I need to dodge its bite at all costs. If I manage to wound its legs, I think I can run away somehow.

In a flash, a white form came in-between them. It swept an arc with the sword it wielded, and the resultant wind blew the dinosaur away. Its white wings seemed as if they were dancing as Sei bore witness to a white angel's descent.

Later, he'd realize that it hadn't been an angel at all but a heaven-winged. At the time, however, the girl was undoubtedly an angel in Sei's eyes.

8

In this world, all corporeal beings outside of humanity could usually be split into animals and monsters. Beings that had not been influenced by mana and retained their original form were animals. Monsters were those that had been influenced by mana and mutated. Generally, monsters were always stronger than animals. The difference between a housecat and a tiger was a good example. Tigers were always stronger, but when a cat was mutated by mana, it might become strong enough to beat a tiger.

Mana mutation affected all aspects of a living thing, making it stronger than anything natural could achieve. But there was one thing that could easily topple that power balance in Mizgarz, and that was dinosaurs. They were an ancient threat that had been around since before humanity. Even without being affected by mana, they were fear-inducing hunters that deemed everything in their sight as food, as if to say that the strong were powerful precisely because of their strength.

Humans were food. Monsters were food. Its own kind was food. Even devilfolk were food. Dinosaurs were a naturally strong predator that deemed anything and everything as something to be eaten. That was just how they were. That was why they were feared and hated throughout Mizgarz, even more so than monsters.

Two hundred years ago, Lufas Mapphaahl had lessened their numbers. Though there were fewer today, dinosaurs still existed, spreading fear throughout the land. And there were some especially feared carnivorous dinosaurs among them. Dinorexes lived in the north. The west had dinoacrocanths. There were dinotalbos in the east, and lastly were the dinogigants in the south. There were other

dangerous dinosaurs, but the above four were especially feared.

And right now, one of them was standing right in front of Sei. It was thirteen meters in height, and it weighed thirteen tons. It was an absolute nightmare by any metric.

On the opposing side, there was a newbie hero and a dainty heaven-winged girl. Any outside viewer would think that this wouldn't amount to a real fight. "Reckless" would be a nice way of putting what they were doing.

But they weren't the only two people participating in the festival. Hearing of the dinosaur, several other adventurers and travelers ran to support Sei and the girl.

"Heh, a dinosaur? I'll finish it in five seconds."

A cool-looking swordsman in all black stepped forward and drew his weapon. Even his sword was dyed an ugly pitch black. With the air of the mighty, he elegantly approached the dinogigant, his mantle billowing in the breeze.

Is this like that one trope? The one where a strong character coolly shows up out of nowhere and defeats the enemy? Sei held that hope in his heart as he watched the dude in all-black.

"Fall to my secret technique. Secret Art: Flowing Blade of Dark Shadow!" All-black guy declared his skill in a low, cool-sounding voice as he slashed at the dinogigant.

And it was deflected by the dinosaur's tail as it swept forward and blew him away with an "oof?!" All that had happened in a mere five seconds.

What good are you if you only last five seconds?!

"Seems like it's not just all talk."

Next, an absolutely ripped, bearded man with bunny ears came forward while cracking his knuckles. He didn't falter, even with the dinogigant's size, after seeing the instant defeat that had just happened. He was like a veteran fighter with absolute confidence in his own strength.

When he reached the dinogigant's feet, he grabbed a gigantic leg with both hands. The dinogigant didn't move, not even an inch.

Wait, did he just try to throw it? Like, no, that's impossible, dude. Look at the size of it!

While Sei was busy with his exasperation, the dinogigant kicked the man away. After rolling on the ground a ways, he stopped, and his eyes rolled into the back of his head. He was unconscious.

"You small-fry. Let me show you how to fight."

Lastly, an older, ripped, macho-looking dude in bikini armor walked up. He ran to the dinogigant's feet and grabbed its thick leg again.

Come on, you already know that's impossible. What the hell have you

been watching up until now? I'm begging you here. Think of the size difference!

The useless man with no ability to learn was kicked away by the dinogigant as well, joining the bunny-eared man in a friendly bout of unconsciousness.

“What the hell did you guys even come here to do...?”

In the end, the only result of their demonstration of the dinosaur's strength was Sei's exasperation. But he pulled it together and held his sword up. Virgo also fixed her grip on her sword and faced the dinogigant with a nervous expression. The dog monster tried to pad out front, but Sei hurriedly grabbed it and dragged it backward before readying himself again.

What was surprising was the dinogigant. Sei had thought that it would attack immediately, but for some reason it was standing still and staring at Sei... No, at Virgo. It could have been that the dinogigant was sensitive to strength because it was a wild animal. It had probably noticed how strong Virgo was, even though her appearance was deceiving, and decided that it shouldn't recklessly attack.

But as a dinosaur, it was never very patient in the first place.

“Gggghh... GYAAAOOOHHHHHH!”

The dinogigant's roar shook the air as it turned on the spot to strike with its tail. It was aiming for Virgo!

But she'd already closed the gap all at once and got right next to its feet while dodging its tail. Then, her sword flashed! Virgo had cut into one leg before rising into the air once again, escaping the dinosaur's grasp. The dinogigant collapsed on its wounded leg, though it was still attached. It quickly got back up, angrily staring up at Virgo, who was still in the sky.

“W-Wow...” Virgo's speed had Sei awestruck, his mouth hanging open.

To him, she was gorgeous, as well as sharp and fast. It was obvious at a glance how different she was from the all-black swordsman from earlier. Virgo's build was, in fact, a back line specialist, so everything she was doing now was her brute-forcing things, using the difference in their stats. However, Sei simply lacked the levels to be able to notice that.

While Sei was busy being too low-leveled to not be awestruck, Virgo and the dinogigant's battle continued. Virgo managed to deal several cuts to the dinogigant with her hit-and-run strategy.

If possible, Sei wanted to help, not to mention that he felt it shameful as a man to simply stand by and watch. He also knew that if he acted clumsily, he might end up being a hindrance instead, so he quickly gave up on participating in the battle. Instead, he took a

handkerchief out of his pocket and spread some random sand and gravel on it before closing it into a package. As soon as Virgo pulled away from the dinogigant, Sei hurled the tiny package as hard as he could at the dinogigant's eye.

"GAAAHHH?!"

"It's a blinder. How do you like it?!"

Man, I'm barely a hero at this point, aren't I?

Even while thinking things like that, Sei was also convincing himself that this was the best he could contribute at the moment. Even though his stats were comparatively low, Sei had still gained way more strength than he'd started out with now that he was over level 30, and he had more than enough to be able to fling a handkerchief filled with sand at a dinogigant's face.

While the dinogigant staggered, Virgo launched a blade of light at it and dealt a deep slash to its torso. When she did, the dinogigant got even angrier and tunnel visioned on her even further. Apparently it didn't even register Sei as a threat, completely ignoring him.

I'm so pathetic. Seriously, it makes me wonder what the hell a hero is even supposed to be. But... This is good luck for me, you reptilian bastard. I'm weak. I know that.

But that doesn't mean I can't do anything.

Sei activated a hero skill he'd only learned recently, "Light Sword." It was a fairly shabby skill that only doubled the strength of the next attack, but paired with the sword that had been found in the Grave of the Black-Winged King it became a strong technique.

For the timing... Now!

As soon as the dinogigant tried to take a big step to attack Virgo, Sei attacked the ground under it! It created a questionable pitfall just barely big enough to fit one of the dinogigant's feet.

Sei immediately ran away and created some distance. He had just made the most annoying, small-minded attack possible. It wasn't the way any man worthy of being called a hero should fight, but while there was little effect, it hadn't been worthless. The dinogigant's foot fell into the hole, causing its stance to crumble and allowing Virgo to make another concerted attack.

"Yaaaahhhh!"

Virgo flew high into the air and, using both her hands to grip her sword, reared back for a huge swing. Then she dropped from the sky! Imitating what Lufas had done in her fight against Scorpius, Virgo slammed her sword into the dinogigant's head with all her might. The moment she hit it, she activated La Pucelle's ability. The slash of light helped Virgo bury her sword deep into the dinosaur's head.

"I'll help! Light Sword!"

Sei activated his skill, doubling the power of Virgo's La Pucelle.

La Pucelle, having become a literal sword of light, dug even deeper into the dinogigant's head, causing blood to spurt out. By the time the sword lost its momentum, it had cleaved all the way from the top of the dinogigant's head to its nose. It was a huge blow.

"GAH... Ah..."

The dinogigant's huge form wavered unsteadily before collapsing with a huge thud. But it didn't just fall. No matter how long they waited, it showed no signs of moving. Not even a twitch. The dog monster even walked right up to it and took a piss on the body.

Seeing that, it finally sunk in for Sei that the dinosaur had been defeated. He clenched his fist.

I don't think I won that. That would be way too presumptuous. It was that girl who won. Yet at the very least, Sei was happy that the danger had passed.

It didn't seem as if this fact had sunk in for the girl yet as she approached Sei, so he praised her efforts. "You did it! You beat that giant abomination!"

"Ah. It's dead? My gran told me that dinosaurs are scary, so I thought it would still get up or transform or something..."

"Transform?!"

It bears repeating that Virgo was a frog in a well, but everyone who was in the well with her were monsters. There was a sheep who could become giant, a golem who was basically a walking weapon, a scorpion who could also become giant, and a demon who could (of course) become giant. The crab had yet to giganticize itself, but he could probably do it too. That was why Libra hadn't quite believed it when she'd been told that the dinogigant was strong.

But she was wrong. Sei waved his hand, denying her claim. "No, that won't happen."

"Uh, thanks. Your support really helped."

"Well, I'm happy to hear you say that, but... Sorry, that was all I could manage."

Sei had known full well he wasn't powerful enough, so he didn't consider what he'd done a mistake. Even so, he thought it was pathetic. In what world did a hero leave the fighting to a cute girl and instead just threw sand or dug holes? Even in the light novels where the hero was just a stepping stone, they could pull off a fight that was at least slightly cooler.

"Uh... Oh right, I still don't know your name. I'm Sei. Minamijuuji Sei."

"Minamijuuji...Sei? That's a strange name."

"Oh, Sei is my personal name. In my country, we say the family name first."

"Oh, I see. Ah, my name is Virgo. I don't have a family name."

Having finished introducing themselves, the two started a friendly and lively conversation. They were rivals in this hunting festival, but they were also comrades who'd defeated a powerful enemy together. Both had honest personalities, so they weren't guarded with each other, and found that they got along surprisingly well.

But the two of them were still immature, as one might've expected. Even if their enemy was no longer moving, it was a mistake to let down their guard and just chat like that.

The dinogigant, which had been still this entire time, suddenly snapped open its eyes and almost leaped upward. No, it wasn't yet dead. Shockingly, it was in possession of such strong life force that it could still move even with its head split open.

"No way! Still?!"

Virgo and Sei turned around on reflex, but the dinogigant's mouth was already right in front of them. But before the bite could reach them, a large gust of wind blew past. The dinogigant stopped moving on the spot, and with its eyes rolled into the back of its head, it finally died. The body fell to the ground.

To Virgo, it only seemed like the dinosaur suddenly got up and then suddenly died. She had no way of figuring out or even questioning what had happened.

"What was that...?"

"Who knows? It got up, but maybe that was the last of its strength? That surprised me."

The two of them were satisfied that it was finally over, at least for the moment. Under that conclusion, they decided to go somewhere else.

* *

"You did it, Libra," I praised.

I was currently high above the spectator seats with my arms crossed. Next to me, Libra was silently peering through the scope of a sniper rifle.

The first thing I'd done after having gotten wind that a dinosaur had appeared was to grab Libra and order her to snipe it. I knew that Virgo wouldn't lose against a dinosaur, or anything of that level, but she still lacked experience in battle. I'd wanted to be sure. So just in case she didn't manage to kill it, I'd been in the air on standby to help follow through, as always.

Then, Libra had magnificently sniped the dinosaur, just like I'd wanted.

Yeah, she's really reliable, isn't she?

"..."

"Libra?"

“It wasn’t me...”

Libra denied my praise, expressionless. *Well, she’s always expressionless.*

Apparently Libra wasn’t the one who’d dealt the finishing blow. There weren’t very many others who could’ve pulled something like this off, though. I looked over at her, waiting for an explanation.

“An instant before my bullet reached the target, someone else’s arrow pierced through its head. All my bullet did was hit a corpse.”

“Who was it?”

Libra put away her rifle. “I do not know. But in this day and age, there are a very limited number of people capable of this,” she replied, looking off into the distance. “I believe there is a more than fifty percent possibility that the ‘Archer’ is nearby.”

“Sagittarius...?”

“Yes.”

Apparently we’d be met with an incident in this country, too, though we only came for a change of pace. Whether this was good or bad luck... Well, at least I could say that trouble loved me.

9

The hunting festival ended safely, and Virgo returned triumphantly as the winner. It was only natural given her level, but it should have at least helped her gain some confidence. I felt kind of bad for the other contestants, but without Virgo, some people would definitely have fallen to the dinosaur, so I considered that to have made things even. At any rate, we would be celebrating her victory tonight. *Let’s have a small party with food made by Libra, Dina, and Karkinos.*

This doesn’t really matter, but I didn’t cook. It wasn’t like I was completely incapable, but what I always did was pretty much just chuck in a bunch of random ingredients to make fried rice. Honestly, every single dish I’d made looked way too terrible to be presented at a party. In that respect, the food that Dina and the others made passed the mark in both looks and taste. The only thing that had me confused was that I saw Libra doing something like a taste test every once in a while. *Can golems even taste?*

“I cannot taste, per se, but my tongue has sensors in it. By touching the food to my mouth, I can analyze the composition of the food and its nutrients. Based off of this as well as past data, I am able to select the flavors that would most please you, master.”

Just what the hell are golems even...? Mizar, you did way too good of a job. I had the feeling that he’d brought golem technology forward a hundred years by himself.

Strange. Shouldn't golems be more like autonomous lumps of iron or rock or something? Why is this one pretty much just an android?

"Okay, the casserole's done!" Dina grinned wide as she placed a pot down in front of us with a heavy thud. The fact that she served it to us still in the pot was kind of exciting.

Wait, isn't this just that western dish? A casserole? I remembered it was a dish where you sliced up meat and vegetables and mixed that along with other ingredients like cheese into some soup and baked it in an oven in a heat-resistant container.

But this was a different world, after all. Common ingredients were probably missing, and other ingredients that hadn't existed in the previous world were mixed in. She'd most likely used an old-fashioned oven made of brick instead of the high-tech ones that were common on the other side too. As a result, it resembled a casserole but was surely something different.

Still... It's creepy how similar these are. It's like skills and knowledge were directly copied over to this world... Or am I just reading into things too much? Guess I should at least ask.

"What's this, Dina?"

"Casserole. It's a staple in Draupnir home cooking. Only, the definition is kind of vague. Pretty much anything with meat and vegetables that you stew in a big pot until it goes soft and gooey can be called a casserole."

"How broad."

"Well, it did originate from the country of beastfolk."

I see. So basically, anything that's cooked in a pot is a casserole, which means the actual recipe and ingredients don't mean much? And that would mean it doesn't matter whether it's Eastern or Western in style either. It's almost like a lesser copy of that world... Like, if you just told someone who had no previous knowledge of casseroles the concept, had them make one, and the inferior copy they made spread anyway...

No, wait. Now that I think about it, that setting did exist.

The Goddess gifted pretty much all of the food culture and technology that existed in this world, and that was apparently why humanity never really invented anything nor felt a need to experiment with trial and error. That was the pretty meta excuse the devs gave when the players would ask, "Doesn't this game world overlap way too much with Earth?" But that actually might have been the truth here.

Technology and knowledge from Earth, huh? I guess it's not impossible, since it's already been proven by the fact that you can use Exgate to bring someone over to this world.

"You know, this is pretty elaborate for a beastfolk dish."

"Are they really that sloppy?"

“Yes. Beastfolk all have very strong stomachs, so they can easily eat meat or vegetables that have only been lightly cooked. If they have to, they can even eat raw food.”

Raw too? I guess that part really does make them beasts.

I ate the fake casserole—I mean casserole—as I listened to Dina’s speech. *Hmm... It tastes somewhat like a gratin. It’s pretty good. Well, I’m willing to bet it was altered to fit our tastes better. It probably tastes worse normally.*

“So what’s our plan for tomorrow onward?” Karkinos asked as he placed a cup with squeezed fruit juice in front of Virgo.

Aigokeros and I were having wine. I hadn’t really drank back on Earth, but ever since I’d possessed this body, alcohol tasted really good. I took a sip to wet my throat and answered the question. “Originally, we would have left Draupnir, but things have changed. Now that it has been revealed that the Archer could be nearby, we will be staying behind to conduct a search.”

“Y E S. So we will be going on a S E A R C H tomorrow, right?”

“Hmph. How could that fool dare cause Miss Lufas so much trouble? He should be showing his loyalty by rushing to her side.” It seemed like Karkinos didn’t care much about the Archer, but Aigokeros was unhappy, chugging his alcohol while muttering complaints about what loyalty is.

Is he drunk? He’s still on his first glass.

“Hmm. For the moment, the plan is to split up into pairs tomorrow. As for the pairs... Hmm... They will be Dina and us, Libra and Karkinos, Aries and Virgo, and lastly Aigokeros and Scorpius.”

“No?!”

After hearing the pairs I’d suggested, Scorpius, who had never left my side, made a face like the world was ending. Then, she glared at Dina, enraged, audibly grinding her teeth. On the other hand, Dina’s face paled, and she broke into a cold sweat.

“U-Umm, Miss Lufas? Please change the pairings. I don’t want to be assassinated by Scorpius.”

“Ah... Hmm, okay then. Dina will be with Aigokeros, and We will pair with Scorpius.”

What should I do? Scorpius’s affection is super heavy and troublesome.

Ignoring Scorpius, who was once again happily nuzzling my arm, I decided to end the meeting for today. All that was left was to take baths and sleep. This was just a small detail, but every time this happened Scorpius would offer to wash my back, and I would refuse. I had the feeling that letting her in would result in something unfortunate happening. After all, she’d been caught by Libra sneaking into the changing room while I was in the bath before. She always tried to come in after me, so I had Libra change the bathwater and

clean the bath just in case. Whenever I happened to wake up at night, I could see Scorpius strung up on the ceiling thanks to Libra, who'd caught her trying to do something.

Like, at this point, Libra was so reliable I didn't know what I'd do without her. *If only she weren't so broken in other respects...* I looked over at Libra. That was when she seemed to have noticed something, as she turned to face the door.

"Master, there is someone outside Tanaka. Judging from their body temperature and breathing, they are nervous but do not harbor any hostility. Should I finish them off?" Libra asked as she readied her machine gun.

Seriously, why does she always just default to deleting people like that? She'd literally just said that she hadn't sensed any hostility, so just how did that translate to finishing the person off?

"No, don't. First, let us hear what they have to say."

It was common sense to talk first if the other party wasn't hostile. I hid my wings within my cloak and had Dina go to greet them. In these cases, Dina was more appropriate for a first impression rather than someone suspicious like me.

She pattered over to the door and opened it. Standing there was a bipedal fox... No, wait, a fox beastfolk. Beastfolk heads and faces were literally that of the animal they took after, so depending on the type they were really cute. It was troubling.

Huh. What happens with echinococcus in a fox beastfolk? I'd like to think there's no reason to worry about it, since they live with us freely.

"Kooon."

The fox beastkin made a really cute cry, but Dina's reaction was as cool, solid, and as excited as cement. "Please speak using Mizgarz Common."

After her retort, he spoke normally. "Ah, okay."

That'd probably been his best attempt at a joke. Thanks to the awful reception, his ears were drooping. *Wait. Actually, is he a "he"?* *It's hard to tell genders with beastfolk.*

"Um, excuse me, but is the person here on this list present?"

"May I see the list?"

"Yes, here."

Dina took the list and returned to us, leaving the fox at the door. Probably because an RV was so rare, the fox was restlessly looking this way and that around the inside.

I took the list from Dina and started scanning the names. Among those listed were unknown names like Bikini Muscle, Shadow, Bunny Dandy, and Sei, but I did see Virgo at the top of the list. *Are these the names of the top rankers in the hunting festival?*

"This is...?"

“Ah’m not really sure on the details, but right now, we’re under orders from the emperor to reach out to all the top rankers. If it doesn’t trouble you too much, please come to the southern warrior’s yurt tomorrow at ten in the morning.”

“And the reason for this gathering?”

“Mah apologies. Ah’m at the bottom of the ladder, so they don’t tell me much. But they aren’t forcing you to do anything. It’s just if you’re okay with it... So please?”

Apparently this fox was just an errand boy. He couldn’t answer pretty much any of my questions, and the fact that Libra had stayed silent meant that he wasn’t lying either.

Hmm, if we feel like it?

He said that they were under the emperor’s orders, which meant that the emperor was the one calling this meeting. No matter how much countries differed, ignoring such a summons would make things very hard for an adventurer or a traveler. It would probably be correct to assume that not showing up would mean they’d be left pretty much unable to work in that country.

This is basically an order disguised as a request, isn’t it? Well, I can still ignore it if I want, though.

Now, then. What should I do about this? If the one being summoned were me or Libra—or anybody other than Virgo, actually—I’d probably just choose to walk into the potential trap.

Even if it turned out to be a trap, any of us would have been able to brute force our way out of it. But Virgo was different. While her level of 300 was amazing for this era, she wasn’t invincible. There were others who could match or even exceed Virgo’s strength, such as the Seven Luminaries. Take that weakling devilfolk that I’d once punched out. If Virgo fought him, there’d be a chance that she’d lose. It wasn’t guaranteed that this invitation wasn’t laced with malice, but there was no downside to being cautious.

After some thought, I decided to respect Virgo’s will. If she wanted to go, I would support her. If she didn’t, then we would just blow them off, and I would deal with the emperor or whatever if they made any complaints. Luckily, political power or influence didn’t mean much to us.

“Virgo, what do you think?”

“Um, I’m thinking I might go. An invitation like this doesn’t come every day, and if there’s something I can do to help, I’d like to.”

So Virgo’s in, then. That just means we’ll have to support her.

I’d just changed plans, but it was time to do so again. Instead of having Aries search for the Archer, I had him on supporting-Virgo duty. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to have an ear in on the conversation until I knew there wouldn’t be any danger posed to Dina and me.

“Understood. There you have it, Messenger. Tell them that Virgo will participate in your little gathering tomorrow.”

“Yes, I will.” Having heard my reply, the messenger fox happily ran off.

I couldn’t take my eyes off of his tail, which swayed with every step. He was probably off to search for the other participants. *How energetic.*

“Then for now, we should sleep in preparation for tomorrow. Since that’s the case, make sure not to stay too long in the bath. We will be shortening our time as much as possible as well.”

“Then, Miss Lufas, today I will—”

“No.”

All I can do is pray that the emperor or whatever didn’t invite Virgo out of malice. I don’t want to have to make an enemy out of an entire country, after all.

10

We were inside a larger yurt in the district of lined-up residential yurts. All the high-rankers from the hunting festival were lined up thanks to the emperor’s invitation, waiting for the time when the reason they were all there would finally be explained. Sei was among these people, and he was looking around in an attempt to kill time. The white-winged girl who’d been the winner was of course there, as was the pervert in the bikini armor and the pompous guy in all black.

They’re high-rankers too? Sei felt like something was out of place. *Wait... Was the all-black guy always that short? He’s wearing sunglasses too. Something seems off...*

But Sei wasn’t very familiar with the man, so he set aside his doubts. But his feeling was actually correct; the man in all black wasn’t the same person from yesterday. The real person had been attacked yesterday and currently was happily unconscious in his room. The person who was standing there now was Aries in a disguise. His disguise had been arranged by Lufas, and he was wearing a black wig. But Sei had no way of knowing that. He totally just let the whole thing go.

Then, after a few minutes of waiting, a small cat beastfolk walked into the tent. He was only around 130 cm tall. He looked exactly like a tiger-striped cat that just happened to be bipedal, and he wore an almost comically small set of armor. When he appeared, all the beastfolk soldiers in the room saluted. Apparently he was quite high-ranking, unlike what his appearance suggested.

After giving the gathered warriors a once-over, the cat beastfolk cleared his throat.

“Everyone: I Am a Cat.”

Did he just...reference an Earth book? Yeah, we can tell. Actually, everyone in the room must be thinking that they could already tell.

Contrary to his appearance, the cat beastfolk's voice was incredibly stoic and manly. It was often said that a beastfolk's gender was hard to discern, but it was fairly obvious he was male.

“I am the leader of Draupnir's warriors. Please call me Petto. To all of you brave warriors: well met, and thank you for responding to this summons. The hunting festival yesterday was brilliant, and the emperor is very pleased.”

Sei was assaulted with an intense need to retort. *The hell is that name? Is that a joke? Is he goofing? Is he waiting for someone to make a big deal out of it?* But when he looked around, no one had batted an eye at what the cat beastfolk had just said, and Sei felt strangely alone at that moment. *It's just me? I'm the only one who thinks that's weird?*

Petto washed his face with his paws and continued speaking. “The reason why you were called here today is that we would love to borrow your skills for the good of this country. Well, to be perfectly honest, the entire reason why we held the hunting festival this time was to find brave warriors like you all.”

“So can we think of this as a job straight from Draupnir itself?” The one who asked the question was a small but very muscular man. His beard was scruffy, and he had an ax in his hands. *He's probably a dwarf.* It was Sei's first time seeing one.

“Indeed.”

“This will be an official request from Draupnir. Of course, we will be preparing a fitting payment. When the request is fulfilled, everyone who participates will receive one thousand el. And the one who actually brings back what we want will get a further fifty thousand el. Of course, I also swear that we will remember all of you with glory and honor.”

At the mention of fifty thousand el, the attitudes of everyone except Virgo, Sei, and the all-black man changed. The size of the reward was absurdly exceptional for an adventurer. As long as there weren't any huge expenses, a person could live luxuriously off of that money for more than ten years. On top of that, they'd still get one thousand el as well as honor even if they weren't the one to bring back what the country wanted. That alone made it worth it to participate. It would make adventuring easier in the future and also serve to spread the adventurer's names.

“So, what do we need to get?” Virgo asked.

“You will all need to climb the sacred mountain Hnithbjorg and retrieve the elixir that is being kept there,” Petto answered.

Having heard that, the first thing that came to Sei's mind was a

screen from a great RPG he'd been playing. The sight was something everybody would have experienced. After an entire game's worth of saving the good recovery items because it felt like a waste to use them, they'd suddenly be at the last boss with almost an entire stack of elixirs, too many to even use in one fight. To Sei, elixirs were like a permanent fixture in one's inventory. Not having one would be a source of unease, but even if he had one, he wouldn't use it. That was what elixirs meant to him. But apparently, it was something that would fetch an absurdly high price in this world.

The crowd started to chatter before a voice rang out in disbelief.

"Elixir?! Ha, don't joke with me! Those are legendary wonder-potions that were all destroyed two hundred years ago by the Devil King!"

"Exactly. But it still exists. Our great founder, the Beast King Dubhe, hid one in Hnitbjorg."

Hearing that, Aries thought back to when they were going up the King's Grave. *The legendary miracle potion, elixir, is something that only a small subsection of alchemical masters can make.*

The recipe was one of the ultimate techniques in alchemy, and it had been made through the joint research of both Lufas Maphaahl and the Wise King Megrez over two hundred years ago. It healed any and all wounds, completely recovered one's mana, healed all illnesses, and even extended one's life span. It was the pinnacle of all medicine.

There were tons of them rolling around in the Grave, weren't there...? Aries thought with a faraway look.

According to Lufas, "We had been saving them to use someday. But it always seemed like a waste, so by the time We'd noticed, We had a pile of them."

Of course, they'd taken all the elixirs with them, and even now they were sitting in Maphaahl Tower. There were a total of forty-three elixirs in the tower. If they'd sold them all, it'd be possible to straight-out buy the entirety of the land within humanity's sphere of influence. It was a ridiculous amount.

From what Aries was hearing, it seemed as if the Devil King had destroyed all the remaining elixirs in the world, but apparently he'd missed the King's Grave.

"Of course, you will not be allowed to take the elixir for yourself. If you try, then consider this entire country your enemy from here on."

The elixir was a cure-all that commanded an exorbitant price. If it were sold, the price for it would make fifty thousand el seem like chump change. It would most likely go for at least ten times that. It wouldn't be strange for those adventurers to be overtaken by greed, but that would result in them making an enemy of an entire country.

After making sure to drive home that point, Petto continued his explanation of the request. “However, there are probably those who won’t be satisfied with just that amount. So, the person who brings back the elixir will also be allowed to take a small portion of the elixir with them,” Petto said, revealing a ridiculously tiny bottle that was small enough to be pinched in between two fingers.

That was probably the amount they’d be allowed to take with them. In physical size, the bottle was only about five centimeters, but seeing that, all the adventurers erupted in excitement. It was just a tiny drop which would disappear in less than a swallow, but its worth was immeasurable. It could heal any wound, treat any illness, and even add a few years or even more than a decade to one’s lifespan. That was just how powerful elixirs were.

The only thing Aries could think of at the moment was the sight of Dina complaining. “You hoard too much!” she’d said, as she had diligently worked to pick up all forty-three bottles of elixir, each of which held what looked like three liters of the potion. *I bet if any of these people here saw that, they’d faint.*

“Um, why do you need something like that?”

“The cornerstone of our country’s pride, our guardian dragon, has suddenly fallen seriously ill... The elixir is necessary to heal it.”

The elixir, being the ultimate wonder-drug, could completely change the course of a war if applied well. For example, if Megrez were to drink one, he’d probably be able to walk again. If Merak were to drink it, he would regain his wings. The Seven Heroes being able to once again move easily even without undoing the Devil King’s curse would change the state of this war considerably. That was probably exactly what the Devil King had been afraid of when he’d destroyed all the elixir left, since it’d been the natural and correct thing to do.

That was also probably why Dubhe had hidden one away. He’d seen this coming. If that’d been the case, now was the time to use such a panacea.

“Right now, with our guardian dragon weakened, our country is susceptible to attack by the devilfolk. In order to stop that, we need the elixir, no matter what.”

They needed to revive their guardian dragon. Otherwise, Draupnir would have no future. The unexpectedly precarious situation caused Sei to gulp. The fact that this was a serious situation with a country’s future on the line was deeply impressed into his heart.

But at the same time, Sei instantly made some internal calculations. He simulated succeeding in bringing back the elixir and using his share of it on Megrez. *The Wise King might be brought back...! We can bring back one of the Seven Heroes, who can turn the tide of a battle by themselves!* So Sei asked another question. “One question...

Will that amount be able to fix paralyzed legs?”

“Yes, it can. This might not be enough if the legs were lost entirely, but if they just won’t move, then this should work.”

The flames of motivation burned in Sei after hearing that. *The elixir... I have to get it.* This dangerous mission was more than worth doing if the Wise King could be healed as a result.

This fact was something Aries already knew, using an elixir on somebody who’d betrayed Lufas was a waste to Aries, so he’d never told her about it. Aries also decided to conveniently take the fact that Lufas had not once talked about giving any of the Seven Heroes some elixir to mean that she still hadn’t forgiven those traitors. There was no way for him to expect the truth... That of all things, Lufas only thought of elixirs as full-HP recovery items at this point.

“I heard that...”

From the gathered people sounded a low voice, and that voice was in no way friendly. It was filled with promised danger. Everyone’s gaze gathered on a common beastfolk soldier. In front of everyone’s eyes, the soldier warped in form, as if he were liquid. It was like he was a humanoid slime. It wriggled around for a while, before settling into the form of a blue-haired young man with a cold aura. He had blue skin and eyes with the blacks and whites reversed—the features of a devilfolk, humanity’s greatest enemy.

“Devilfolk!”

“I’m surprised. To think there was still an elixir left. Such a thing could heal the Seven Heroes.” The young man fixed everyone there with a condescending gaze while speaking in an emotionless voice.



Petto reacted quickly, drawing his sword and slashing at the devilfolk at a speed that Sei could just barely catch with his eyes. The sword bit deeply into the devilfolk's form, but there wasn't a drop of blood. In fact, there was barely any response at all to the sword going into him. The part of the devilfolk where the sword slashed through simply wriggled for a while as water.

"It won't work."

The devilfolk's arm bent like a whip as it assaulted the shocked Petto. The single strike caused his armor to shatter, and Petto fell, unmoving. Petto was in a position to lead other soldiers, so he should have had the strength to match. But he was still like this after one hit.

So strong... Sei thought, convinced as cold sweat started to bead on his skin.

"Is he dead? Or is he simply unconscious...? At any rate, that is what happens when you challenge someone without understanding the difference in our strength. Use this experience to become a little wiser."

"You bastard!"

The devilfolk's mocking words caused the other beastfolk soldiers to erupt in rage and stab at him with their lances all at once. But of course, it didn't work. The spears went straight through the devilfolk like they were stabbing at water, and the young man's expression didn't change a bit.

"Such useless actions..."

The devilfolk man moved his fingers quickly, drawing a pentagram in the air. It was a circle needed as a vessel to activate magic. Wood sat at the vertex, and from there in clockwise order were Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. Each point of the star connected the element to their opposites, showing their relationships. He also drew a double circle enclosing the formation, symbolizing the Moon and Sun elements. Finally, he concentrated his mana and poured it into the finished vessel.

"Magic?! No way, that was too fast!"

It was common knowledge that magic needed three processes to activate. The caster needed to create a vessel, gather mana and pour it into the vessel, and lastly, finalize the magic and launch it. The speed at which the caster could complete those processes directly showed the skill of the caster, and those with a lot of experience could always activate magic faster. At the pinnacle of all that was casting magic with no requisite behavior at all. Megrez, Aigokeros, and the Devil King were all at that level. The Seven Luminaries could cast simple spells with no need for such actions as well.

On the other hand, that also meant that if one of the Seven

Luminaries were using those actions, they were trying to cast an equivocally large spell.

“Apsaras!”

The devilfolk created a giant swan made of water. Inside the tent, there was no place to run. The spell that was a bird cried out, and the tent was blown up from the inside.

11

Apsaras was a magic spell that changed mana into a large amount of water, formed it into a large swan, and slammed that into the caster’s enemies. The most standout feature of this spell was its ability to track the target. The swan would automatically chase the enemy it had locked onto as its target and would not let it get away. It was a spell that wasn’t lacking in power, scope, and accuracy. But for all that, it needed a correspondingly large amount of mana and was likewise difficult to cast. If a human were to try and cast that spell, they would definitely need at least a couple minutes. Yet for the devilfolk man, it’d been easy and quick. Just that showed the difference in their power.

“Force Barrier!”

Just before the water swan hit everyone, a wall of light sprung up to protect them. It was a defensive wall made of divine power by Virgo.

It wasn’t an easy feat for a barrier erected so hastily to stop that spell completely. Normally, the swan would have broken through after some delay due to the clash. But rainbow-colored fire got in between the swan and the barrier, evaporating enough water for the barrier to be able to defend against the enemy’s spell. On top of that, the rainbow-colored fire changed course and started eating into the devilfolk’s right arm.

This all happened so quickly that the only ones who’d noticed what happened were Virgo and the devilfolk.

“I don’t know who you are, but it looks like there’s a troublesome one among you... I’m not a fool who doesn’t understand his own strength. I suppose I’ll have to take my leave here,” the devilfolk said while looking at his arm, which had disappeared after only one attack. He then jumped away and hid himself.

Aries saw everything, but he decided not to give chase. It would be easy to hunt the young man down and kill him, but the job that’d been given to him by Lufas was to support Virgo. Aries couldn’t risk the chance of something happening to her if he left. In the end, Aries could kill an enemy of that caliber at any time. There was no need to rush to finish him off.

“H-He left?” Sei was mystified at the sudden disappearance of the enemy.

The bikini armor guy agreed with that sentiment. “Looks like it.”

The skirmish hadn’t lasted very long, but it was still enough for everyone to realize the gap in strength between them and the enemy. There was no way he was any normal devilfolk soldier. Having realized that, Petto muttered bitterly while still on the ground, “Th-The polish and power of that Water spell just now... No way. Is that Mercurius of the Seven Luminaries?”

Virgo rushed over and started healing Petto’s wounds with heaven-arts. Soon after she started, much of the pain disappeared from his expression, and he looked to be feeling much better.

“Mercurius?” Virgo repeated.

Petto nodded. “I’ve only heard rumors, but they say that there is a man among the devilfolk who possesses a liquid body and is immune to physical attacks. That totally fits with the man we fought just now. On top of that is his skill with Water elemental magic.”

“A-A Luminary? That’s no joke. I’m out! No number of lives’ll be enough to face that monster!”

“M-Me too! This isn’t the sort of thing to ask of an adventurer! Go get your national army and all their training to get that elixir!”

The moment the enemy’s name left Petto’s mouth, there was an uproar, and several men left the tent before anyone could react. That was only to be expected. The biggest threat to humanity in these times were the Seven Luminaries of the devilfolk. Only seven of them had cornered humanity; they were terrifying invaders, so just the idea of fighting them was abnormal.

They were still terrifying figures, even if Lufas could punch them into the sky with a single blow, or if they didn’t stand a chance against Libra, or if Aigokeros treated them like weaklings, or if Aries didn’t even consider them worth chasing. Lufas and her party were the ones that were strange. That fact must not be forgotten.

Thus, almost all of the contestants from the hunting festival ran, leaving only three people behind. It was just Virgo, Sei, and Aries in an all-black disguise.

“Th-This is bad... What to do?”

“They have a point, though. I think it’d be better to send soldiers with training to the mountain instead of some adventurers.”

Petto groaned over the loss of the contestants, but it was only natural for them to leave. After all, none of them had received any proper training, and they weren’t being provided with weapons, either. Adventurers were just civilians who happened to hunt monsters for a living, so they wound up being stronger than most civilians. Even the weapons they carried were cheap bunk compared

to what soldiers got. Adventurers had to use every trick they had to make it work. Every once in a while one did manage to find a good weapon in some ruins, but those were exceptions to the rule. This wasn't like the game Sei had played. Adventurers who traveled around wielding legendary weapons just didn't exist.

"If that were possible, we'd have done it already. It's because we can't that we tried to recruit adventurers."

"What? You can't?"

"That mountain is a sacred place. That's why there's a barrier over it that turns away monsters. And it works on us beastfolk too."

The first thing Sei thought of after hearing Petto's reply was what Kross had taught him about humanity in this world. The beastfolk, who numbered among humanity, were in essence no different from monsters according to Kross. Orcs made a good example; by more extreme definitions, they were basically just pig beastfolk. They were descended from humans, changed by mana, and had animal characteristics. There was basically no difference.

Then what made beastfolk different from orcs? The answer was whether or not they could coexist with other humans. Beastfolk could. That was why they were considered part of humanity. Orcs couldn't. That was why they were categorized as monsters. That was the only difference, meaning that most things that worked on monsters also worked on beastfolk.

"But that was also a stroke of luck this time. The barrier that protects against monsters is more specifically an anti-mana barrier, so the devilfolk can't get in either. We won't have to worry about the elixir being stolen right away."

"A mana repellent, is it?"

Sei planned to consult with his party after this, but the barrier was a problem. The reason being that the strongest member of Sei's party was the Sword Saint, Friedrich. He was a tiger beastfolk, so they wouldn't be able to bring along their strongest member.

On the other hand, Virgo looked at Aries worriedly, and he replied with a gesture indicating this wasn't a problem. It wasn't nice to say, but the world as it now was just couldn't erect a barrier strong enough to keep out a real monster like any of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. More accurately, there was no one strong enough. If anyone wanted to keep out one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars, they would need something on the level of Alioth's barrier covering Laevateinn. The barrier was most likely something one of the Seven Luminaries could force themselves through as well, though it would probably have some effect. That meant Petto's assumption was fundamentally wrong, but Aries purposefully didn't point that out.

"But we can't take things too slowly. Now that the secret of the

elixir is out, the Seven Luminaries will surely figure out some method of stealing it. Probably something like brainwashing a human.”

“So you’re saying we don’t have much time?”

The situation was already down to the wire. Without the elixir, the guardian dragon would be lost, and this country would fall. And if they left the elixir alone, then it would be taken by one of the devilfolk.

Sei looked forward, determined, and started walking towards the exit of the tent.

“Wh-Where are you going?”

“Just wait a second, please. I’ll call my friends.”

This was an important battle for the survival of an entire country. Having been convinced of that, Sei decided to immediately go and gather his friends. But the second he stepped outside the tent, he found his friends already waiting for him. Beside them, the ranger squad that had been working in the shadows for them gave him a thumbs up, letting him know that they’d probably gone and called his friends for him.

“Looks like it’s our time to shine, Sei.” Jean grinned and stepped inside the tent.

After him, Gantz, Nick, Shuu, Richard, the female knight (gorilla), and the tiger all gathered as the hero’s party. Looking at them all together, Sei was once again reminded of how disparate they were.

“Y-You all are...?”

“I’m Gantz, a mercenary. I’m in the hero’s party right now, though. I know it doesn’t fit me, though. No idea how they made this mistake. Ha ha. Well, this is an emergency. We didn’t take part in the hunting festival, but just shut up and let us help anyway.”

After hearing Gantz’s name, Petto’s eyes opened wide. He couldn’t hide his surprise at the sudden appearance of the one rumored to be the strongest mercenary, someone whose name was known by anybody who made fighting their business. What surprised Petto even further was the sight of the bipedal tiger behind Gantz.

“Y-You’re Fried!”

“Grrr...”

“Yeah, it really has. I’ve heard tales of your fame.”

“Graaahh!”

“Yeah, of course I’m fine. You should come by later and show your face to everyone.”

“Graowl!”

“If you’re worried about that, then hurry up and confess. She won’t be waiting around for you forever, you know.”

“Um, excuse me! Could you please speak in a language we can understand?”

While Petto could understand what Friedrich was saying and their conversation was just getting lively, Sei had no idea what was going on. He couldn't stop himself from raising his voice, but who could blame him?

When Sei spoke up, the female knight stepped forward and started to interpret what Friedrich was saying. "It seems that this cat beastfolk who's their leader is actually Friedrich's older brother. It's been a long time since they've seen each other, so they were catching up."

"Brothers?!" Sei reflexively shouted before turning to compare the two of them.

Petto was a cat beastfolk 130 cm tall. On the other hand, Friedrich was a tiger beastfolk over 2.5 m tall. Their size difference was exactly that of a cat versus a tiger. It was a little unbelievable that the two of them had the same mother.

They probably noticed what Sei's stare implied. Petto touched his paw pads to his face, embarrassed. "Yeah, I know we don't look very similar. We get that a lot. I resemble our father, and Fried here takes after our mother."

"That's not the problem here."

Sei couldn't help but wonder just what kind of parents could produce brothers like this. The biology of beastfolk was truly mysterious. But if they were relatives, that made things easier. There wouldn't be any need for extraneous explanations or trouble.

After the two of them had some time to converse, they eventually shook hands firmly.

"Looks like things are settled. We got permission to come along."

It seemed as if Friedrich managed to obtain permission. As always, the value of the hero and the Sword Saint title pulled their weight. Both the hero party and the Sword Saint were important enough to be tied with the pride of a country. Draupnir wouldn't be able to expect better support if they refused the party here.

The party decided to quickly set off for Hnitbjorg with only the members that were here.

"Then I'll show you the way. Please come with me."

★

★

Libra and Karkinos were in a large grassland spreading out from Draupnir on a mission to search for the Archer, though the one who was mainly searching was Libra. Karkinos was almost completely useless. Libra searched in every nook and cranny, leaving no stone unturned. Eventually, she picked up what she'd been looking for.

It was a single arrow. It was the weapon that had been used to kill the dinosaur before Libra's sniper round could get to it, and it'd most likely been fired by the Archer. She didn't have any need for the

arrow itself, but finding out what angle it was lying at could tell her where it'd been launched from.

Libra's eyes flitted back and forth, numbers and words detailing the calculations of the direction of the arrow, the wind direction, and speed dancing through her sight. Eventually, a single area was highlighted in her sight, distinguished with a circular marker. Of course, she was the only one who could see all that. There was no physical marker there.

"There, huh...?"

It's closer than I expected, Libra thought. The Archer should have been able to shoot from much farther away... Yes, even farther than would be possible for me.

The site the evidence suggested was closer, much closer. It was basically only a stone's throw away from the audience seating for the hunting festival.

Then I'll just have to look there next. The Archer must have taken steps to erase any traces he would have left behind, but he shouldn't have been able to get rid of all of them. For example, a small shade of a footprint left in the dirt. Or some trampled grass. Or maybe even a stray hair. As long as something like that existed, Libra would be able to string each clue together.

"We're going to the next site, Karkinos."

"Y e s."

Libra headed for the next search area while dragging along the completely useless Karkinos. All that she needed to do was follow the trail of clues one after the other until she reached the Archer. It was extremely difficult to be able to get away from Libra once she was on your trail. That applied even to a fellow member of the Twelve Heavenly Stars.

12

There were small clues leading to the Archer here and there. While following them, Libra started to have some suspicions. Such misgivings only grew deeper and more serious the closer she got until it became conviction.

There's no doubt... These traces have been left behind on purpose. He left just enough so that no normal person would understand, but I would. I don't know what he's after, but it seems he's calling me. That's perfect... We can simply accept the invitation and question him in person.

There's no sign of any traps. I've been constantly monitoring passing terrain, heat maps, and sounds coming for several kilometers around me, and I can at least say that there are no traps set for us.

The Archer was a master at hunting. While Libra could match him

in a long-ranged shooting match, his true strength lay in using the terrain to his advantage to set traps, as well as his abundant knowledge. His role was also to compensate for Lufas's inability to cast attack magic. The Archer was best at casting attack magic that launched arrows, which meant that his act of using a real arrow despite that was clearly meant to leave clues behind for Libra to trace.

However, Libra chose not to retreat in the face of that. All her efforts would be wasted if she left and called Lufas only for him to have hidden himself in the meantime. Even Libra wouldn't be able to find him easily if he were to truly attempt to hide himself, and with his mobility, it'd be easy for him to leave this entire area by the time she would be able to return with Lufas in tow. So the fact that he had invited her was a windfall. All she had to do was continue forward.

Having decided that, Libra continued tracing the clues to her destination with Karkinos in tow.

Tiny things like a slight footprint here and some traces of trampled grass there along with some hair left in trees or in grass became clues that led Libra to her goal. Like that, she continued to search, and eventually, she reached a particularly dense part of the forest. There was a lot of cover and places to hide, a perfect battleground for the Archer.

"You're here, Libra."

"Sagittarius."

Libra turned towards the voice and saw a single man. She remembered him as the slender man who'd been commentating the hunting festival, Chiron. But that form was only something constructed with an illusion. Libra instantly saw through that and used his real name.

In response, the Archer—Sagittarius—laughed, satisfied, and waved his hand. When he did, the figure of the slender man disappeared and was replaced with a burly centaur. His lower half was that of a horse, and his upper half was that of a muscular, burly man. This was Sagittarius's true form.

He wore his black hair in a crew cut. Sharp eyes were hidden behind thick eyebrows and a pair of sunglasses. He had the presence of a seasoned hunter. His mouth was surrounded by stubble and occupied by a cigar. Based on his looks, he'd be in his late forties in human years.

He wore a robe that one would pull over their head, which was something that had been made and given to him by Lufas. Its effect was nothing big. It didn't give much defense either, and it granted no ability to spurn attacks from any elements or status conditions. It was simply able to change its color to blend into the surroundings. While it was exceedingly good for stealth, it was pretty much meaningless in

front of Libra, who could use breathing or temperature to determine her target's location.

"This is rare. You usually don't show yourself in front of other people like this."

Sagittarius remained silent.

"'Ideally, you kill your target before they realize you're an enemy.' I believe those were your words. This is seriously unlike you. You usually don't even show yourself to your friends and almost exclusively kill your targets at long-range. This is suspicious."

Even though Sagittarius was a long-range fighter just like Libra, they were still different. Libra was a pursuit and extermination type. She tenaciously chased her enemies to the ends of the earth and used high firepower to completely destroy them. She was a murder machine. In other words, she was very proactive and aggressively chased and pushed her enemies even though she was a long-ranged fighter. Her long-range attacks weren't to zone out the enemy and keep her distance while fighting. She used them to shoot her enemies in the back as they ran; they were there to take away their means of escape.

But Sagittarius was the complete opposite. His race—the centaurs—used their mobility to constantly keep their enemies at a distance and liked to attack from dead angles. They were complete sniper types. Libra started with a warning to have her enemies recognize her so she could suppress them with fear. But Sagittarius would never do that. He would bury them in one hit while they were unguarded and unaware. In other words, he was an assassin. Libra was different from him; she was a pro at combat. However, Sagittarius was a pro at killing. Whenever he would show himself to people, he would always be disguised... He always hid his true form.

That was why Libra was suspicious. Feeling safe because he was a comrade? No. If that were actually the case, he would have shown himself to Lufas at the beginning. The fact that he hadn't done that and instead showed himself to Libra first meant this wasn't a friendly gesture.

"Right now, I don't have the right to face Miss Lufas. That's why I called you."

"You realize I will take that to mean that you are doing something unbeneficial to her?"

"I don't mind. But first, I'd like you to hear me out."

Sparks flew between Libra and Sagittarius as they stared at each other.

As for Karkinos, he was being completely excluded from this exchange. The threatening atmosphere of the conversation left no room for him to assert himself, so he was lifelessly sitting up against a

nearly tree hugging his knees to his chest. As always, he was a completely useless man outside of his role of a shield.

“Right now, I’m working with Leon.”

“That traitor...? Tell me why.”

Before asking anything further, Libra readied her machine gun. It was a clear statement saying that depending on his answer, she’d shoot. But Sagittarius wasn’t shaken by that. His stone-facedness was just as strong as Libra’s.

“There’s almost no difference between beastfolk and monsters. Even so, us centaurs are treated as monsters. Do you know why?”

“Because you aren’t bipedal. The definition of humanity in this era is based off of the form of a standard human. One is considered humanity as long as their form doesn’t greatly deviate from that—even with wings or other things—and they can coexist with other humans. To be more precise, humans were created after the image of the Goddess, so by deviating largely from that form, they are no longer strictly human. And centaurs do not fit within that framework. This is also the reason why mermaids and other similar species are considered monsters.”

“Exactly. But we centaurs don’t kidnap women like orcs do, and neither do we aggressively attack people. We simply live quietly. Centaurs can, in fact, coexist with people. But we are still viewed as enemies...just because we are classified as monsters.”

For monsters, centaurs were indeed peaceful and discreet. Judging from their calm and gentle demeanors, it could be said that they were actually more cultured and intelligent than some beastfolk currently recognized as part of humanity. In fact, elves praised them as “sages of the forest” and treated them with respect. They were intelligent, quiet, and kind. There were some exceptions, like Sagittarius, but most centaurs fundamentally prized peace. They basically posed no threat. But outside of elves, the rest of humanity viewed them as enemies. Depending on the situation, they’d even attack unprovoked. And only because in this era, they were taught that centaurs were monsters.

“I want to change this world. I have a reason to now.”

“And that’s why you’re siding with Leon?”

“Exactly. If he conquers the world, then he’ll give monsters rights. When that happens, we centaurs will gain much better treatment.”

“You’ve changed, Sagittarius. You used to not mind things like that. I remember that it just didn’t fit with your personality.”

“Of course I’ve changed... It’s been two hundred years. I can’t just stay as I was back then. I have something I want to protect now.”

Leon was the only nonconformist among the Twelve Heavenly Stars who served under Lufas. He had ambition and desired to rule the

world instead of the Devil King or Lufas. It was true that if he were to rule the world, monsters would gain rights. But all that awaited people under that rule were days governed by survival of the fittest, with no room for intelligence or culture. It would be a return to the mindless world of beasts and dinosaurs before humanity came to be. And that was a far cry from the world that Lufas envisioned.

“Leon is not fit to be king. At best, he could be employed as the chief of a horde. You should know that, shouldn’t you?”

“I do know. I plan to compensate for the intelligence he lacks by staying by his side.”

“No, you don’t. That man won’t heed any advice you give him. He lives by listening only to his instincts and desires. He’s basically a monster himself.” Libra pointed her machine gun at Sagittarius as she spoke emotionlessly. “So I’ll warn you. All will be forgiven if you return to our master. But if you persist in helping Leon, I will deem you a threat, and I will remove you now.”

“Sorry, but I’ve already decided. I’ll do anything for their futures. Even if that means making an enemy of Miss Lufas!”

Sagittarius howled as he drew his bow. He didn’t use a real arrow this time. It was a magic arrow made of burning red flame. Sagittarius’s element was Wood, so he hadn’t originally been a threatening opponent for Libra. But the bow Lufas had given him two hundred years ago was trouble! Its effect was to change the attribute of magic. Its name was “Chaos Media,” and it was a one-of-a-kind bow given to him so he would always be able to strike at his enemy’s weak point.



Basically, that single bow had completely crumbled the absolute advantage Libra was supposed to have had in this fight.

“That’s nothing! Karkinos barrier!”

“W h a t?!”

Libra swiftly grabbed Karkinos, who was nearby, and put him in front of the magic arrow that was shot at her. While Karkinos was useless for anything other than being a shield, he was the strongest shield in the Twelve Heavenly Stars. While it may have been the wrong way to use him, Libra managed to survive Sagittarius’ first strike undamaged thanks to her utilization of Karkinos.

“Hostile intent towards Master: confirmed. Hereby designating Sagittarius as an enemy. Moving to eliminate.”

Libra squeezed the trigger of her machine gun, spraying bullets. But Sagittarius had already hidden himself among the trees, dodging all her bullets. He had probably already expected her to do that.

Libra immediately switched weapons from her machine gun to a rifle, proceeding to chase after Sagittarius with her weapon in one hand and Karkinos clutched in the other.

The combination of Sagittarius and Leon is a slightly troublesome one. If I don’t finish him before they regroup, then they will surely become a hindrance to my master.

Libra continued advancing, heedless of the magic arrows that flew from beyond them which she had to defend against using Karkinos. A ball of fire came barreling down at them from above, so she used Karkinos to deflect it.

“N O?!”

The Water arrow that weaved through the trees at them hit Karkinos as well.

“S T O P!”

Libra jumped off of a spear of earth that sprung out of the ground and threw Karkinos to intercept a steel arrow that was launched at them.

“O H M Y G O D!”

Libra retrieved Karkinos before speeding up. She used him to cover up a wall of fire that appeared. Then, with him on top of it, she broke through the opening.

“H E L P M E!”

Every time he was hit, Karkinos would cry out, but this was a rare chance for him to shine. Libra told him to just suck it up before pointing her gun at Sagittarius. Then she fired. She sprayed a string of tracking bullets that Lufas had made, which chased down Sagittarius. Of course, the bullets didn’t travel straight for their target. Several of the bullets purposefully went off track and ricocheted or busted

through trees in front of Sagittarius, blocking his path. But Sagittarius managed to dodge all the bullets and even passed through the busted trees before they fell.

I guess I should have expected that from a centaur. They're proud of their legs. It's annoying how fast they are.

I'd like to use Astraia to just mow everything down, but I can't do that without Lufas's permission. Meaning that I'll need to find a way to eliminate Sagittarius on my own, since I can't contact Lufas at the moment.

Libra handed off her rifle to Karkinos for the moment and released the inner workings of her right arm.

“Skill Selection: Right Arm limiter removed. Release: Zuben El Genubi!” Libra declared as her right arm transformed into a cannon, which she aimed at Sagittarius, who was running away in front of her.

Libra was currently using infrared vision, which basically made Sagittarius' camouflage robe useless. In her sight, a round marker laid over Sagittarius' heat signature, and a message popped up signaling that lock-on had been achieved.

“Hit chance: Sixty-two percent... Fire!”

Sparks ran along the barrel of her cannon, and the aftershocks of her cannon firing blew away the vegetation behind Libra. The beam of light launched from her weapon completely blasted through trees and anything else that was in the way as it advanced towards Sagittarius.

But Sagittarius suddenly dodged to the side, avoiding a direct hit. However, that single attack completely cleared the way towards Sagittarius. Libra used her verniers and quickly accelerated, becoming like a bullet herself as she drew near Sagittarius.

Then, using her metal head, she headbutted Sagittarius in the face.

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Sagittarius ran through the forest, wiping the blood from the nosebleed he'd gained because of Libra's headbutt before looking off to the side.

Libra was there, flying parallel to him, a few trees in between them. Her right arm was back to normal, and her mechanical eyes were fixated on Sagittarius. Both of them were moving at a speed unreachable by any normal human or even monster, and they were weaving through the trees all the while. No, if one looked closer, they could see that Libra occasionally grazed the trees, but she didn't pay it any mind.

“Target locked. Fire!”

Libra shouldered her rifle and aimed. The tracking bullets spat out by the rifle avoided the obstacles in the way of their target, rushing

Sagittarius while taking trajectories normally unthinkable for a bullet. But Sagittarius unleashed violent winds around him, changing the trajectory of the bullets and firing a magic arrow of his own as a counterattack.

But no arrow fired directly at Libra would work on her. Once again, she used Karkinos as a shield and shot lasers from her eyes. Sagittarius dodged them, but immediately afterward, Libra's palm opened up, revealing another barrel. It turned out to be a flamethrower.

"You plan to burn down the forest?"

Sagittarius quickly changed his magic to the Water attribute, launching it as an arrow to put out the fire. But that left an opening for Libra to launch her arm as a fist-rocket towards Sagittarius. This was more commonly referred to as a rocket punch.

But Sagittarius was capable of more than just long-range combat. He was still part of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. His base stats were high enough for him to be competent in close combat. Sagittarius slammed his own fist at the rocket punch, canceling out its momentum.

The arm returned to Libra. Libra reattached her arm while muttering in a cold tone. "It seems like that attack just now fractured bone. Will update predictions to consider reduced accuracy."

"You really are amazingly hard to fight."

The two had finally made it out of the forest and were currently standing on a rough, rocky mountain. This change in terrain now put Sagittarius at a disadvantage. This area would always put Libra, who could fly, at an advantage, especially since there was no cover.

But Sagittarius simply continued up the mountain. His horse lower-half continued to run at full speed up the almost-vertical, rough mountain rock. Libra continued to give chase, but Sagittarius continuously produced magic arrows, launching them to hinder her pursuit. Libra dodged every single shot and returned fire of her own. But Sagittarius wouldn't be beaten. He dodged Libra's bullets with equal agility and continued to attack. Arrows and bullets crossed many times, but their skills showed and neither was hit.

In the midst of all that, Sagittarius was the first to show his hand. He nocked a large arrow and concentrated magic power at the tip of it.

"I see. You're going to use Al Nassr, the arrow that once fired will never miss?"

"Exactly. Even you won't be able to dodge this one."

In Mizgarz, several feared skills existed and were referred to as having absolute accuracy. Some were the type to leave no room for escape, like Libra's Brachium, while others would simply continue to

track the target until it was hit. Lufas's Shine Blow, which traveled at the speed of light and thus couldn't be avoided, was also considered to have absolute accuracy.

But Al Nassr fit into none of those categories. As soon as it was fired, it would have already hit its target. In other words, there was no travel time. Far from being possible to intercept or dodge the attack, this skill was on an entirely different plane. Just launching it equaled a hit. Even Libra had no method of avoiding it. Her only recourse was to stop it from being fired in the first place.

Of course, Libra also couldn't just stop the arrow with Karkinos. Even with his covering ability, he couldn't get in front of an arrow that didn't even travel. But Libra still considered this to be opportune.

"I see. But the instant you attack will be my greatest chance."

In response to Sagittarius's attack stance, Libra threw away Karkinos and transformed her right arm. Libra was aiming to fire at the same time Sagittarius did, leaving him no room to dodge either. Even Sagittarius would be unguarded at the moment he attacked. Since she wouldn't be able to avoid the hit anyway, Libra steeled herself and committed to bringing Sagittarius down with her.

Both parties glared at each other without a single twitch, waiting for the moment to unleash their attacks.

"Al Nassr!"

"Zuben El Genubi!"

An arrow of fire shot out from Sagittarius's bow, and in less than a tenth of a second, a beam of light came out from Libra's right arm. At the same time that her beam of light was fired at Sagittarius, Libra activated her jet thrusters.

While the damage from Al Nassr would be coming in just a moment, Libra decided not to pay it any mind. She had no idea where it would hit. It could be her torso, her chest, her neck, or even her head. But no matter where it landed, she was confident she could take it. And, as a golem, she knew she could continue to fight, even with some damage. So there was no need to be worried over some damage.

I just need to chase him down and finish him!

But in the next instant, Sagittarius defied Libra's expectations. The arrow he'd fired didn't hit Libra. Instead, Sagittarius disappeared.

He hadn't escaped by running. And he hadn't flown at high speeds either. Sagittarius had managed to literally disappear in a way that Libra could not detect. That was the only way it could be described, and in a rare turn of events, Libra was truly confused at the situation. She stopped on the spot and looked around the area, searching for her enemy and finding no traces. There was no hide nor hair of him. There was no sound or even any residual heat. He wasn't hiding. Sagittarius truly was no longer in the area.

Libra immediately switched to attempting to find out what happened, and she played back the visual record of what had just occurred. She observed in great detail what Sagittarius had done just seconds earlier before he'd unleashed the arrow. And she noticed that right after launching his arrow, Sagittarius had grabbed onto it.

"He got me..."

Sagittarius's target had never been Libra. He had most likely targeted something far away, like a far-off tree or something. Then, Sagittarius had grabbed onto the arrow that exceeded causality to always hit its target and was taken along with the arrow to whatever he targeted.

This was the first time Libra had ever seen an arrow used like that. Sagittarius had used the skill two hundred years ago, but he had never once done that with it. Libra was able to discern the future from past data, and she could do it with better accuracy than any modern computer. But looking at it the other way, that also meant that she would never expect something that she didn't have in her memory. And that was a hole in her defenses, a secret loophole in her thought processes. By using a trump card that Libra hadn't seen two hundred years ago, Sagittarius had managed to escape from Libra, a feat that was said to be impossible.

Having gained knowledge of Sagittarius's trump card was still a large boon. But given how troublesome he and Leon would be combined, though, Libra considered her failure to capture him here too high a price to pay.

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Sei and the others were currently walking up Hnitbjorg's mountain path in single file. As befitting of a sacred mountain, it was an odd place. Given that it was a mountain, Sei and the others had been expecting a hard climb, but this one wasn't. There were caves here and there, and passing through each one got them higher and higher.

It's like a dungeon in an RPG, Sei thought.

The insides of the caves were lit with crystals that gave off purple light, which grew on the floor, the walls, and even the ceiling. Kross, who was designated as the party's rear guard, was looking every which way, surprised.

"A-Amazing... These are all mana crystals! There's so much materialized mana... Just how much money would we make if we brought all these crystals back?"

"These go for a lot?"

"They do. Materialized mana is one of the best materials for alchemy. It can also be used as a catalyst for magic. If you attach one

to the end of a staff, it can support your magic too. Honestly, if this wasn't a sacred mountain, I'd want to take as many as I could carry back right now."

Apparently, this place was like a mountain of treasure to a magic user like Kross. He was rather excited and looking at the crystals really greedily.

If you want some that much, why not just take a few? Sei thought, but the fact that Kross hadn't yet was a sign of how earnest he was.

Aries could also understand why Kross was so excited, at least a little, since he could remember a time when Lufas had acted the same way when she'd gone to mountains and caves filled with mana. She'd ended up mining the crystals excessively, though.

Still, these crystals should be pretty common wherever mana gathers, so they shouldn't fetch that high a price...

If I'm remembering right, the conditions for these to grow were a place where mana could gather that also made it hard for the mana to disperse outside afterward as well as a lack of living things that would absorb the mana... I remember Lufas saying, "Basically, we need to go for hollows and caves like this!"

But on top of that, this place had an anti-mana barrier over it, making it impossible for mana to pass through. As a result, the mana that had originally pooled in this mountain could no longer escape. Unable to travel the mountain, it had simply crystallized. It was truly a product of coincidence.

Maybe I should take a couple with me as a present for Miss Lufas... Aries considered the idea before retrieving some crystals at a speed no one else could notice, hiding them within his mantle. Virgo was barely able to register that Aries had done something, but she couldn't tell what.

"Are you okay, Virgo? A-Are you tired?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

Given how difficult the path they were on was to walk, Sei worried about Virgo even while being out of breath himself. But even though Virgo looked weak, she was level 300. She had the second most stamina out of everyone there. She was easily climbing with a nonchalant expression. In fact, Sei was the one who was lagging behind the most. He was even slower than the dog that was energetically running around his legs. The stratification of levels was truly a hard thing.

"By the way, I thought... No, I've been thinking... Is that gorilla beastfolk over there all right...?" Aries tripped over the unfamiliar manner of speech, but managed to communicate his worries for the female knight.

This place was enclosed by a monster repellent barrier, and while

those of high level like Aries would be fine, the barrier was like poison to low-level beastfolk. So, thinking that this must be extremely painful for the gorilla beastfolk, Aries spoke up, but the female knight froze instead.

“Sshhh! We don’t say that about her! She’s a human, not a beastfolk! It’s true that she looks like a gorilla though!” Jean hurried to come to the rescue, but his attempts turned into a second-strike instead.

The gorilla’s—no, the female knight’s—fist buried itself in Jean’s face, downing him. Then, still grunting in resentment, she continued forward. She was a lady, after all. Even if she knew she resembled a gorilla, the words still hurt.

“By the way, that devilfolk person... Mercurius of the Seven Luminaries? Do you think he’ll attack us?” Nick, who was an adventurer and part of Sei’s party, muttered while still wary of his surroundings.

“Yeah, he’ll definitely come for us. He won’t be able to just let the elixir go,” answer Gantz.

Even if he managed to get in, they should be able to at least fight at an advantage, since this place was enclosed in a barrier. But, not having Friedrich with them was still worrying. The problem was where and when he would strike. Petto had predicted that he’d brainwash a human to do his bidding, but none of them had seen anyone like that so far. Instead, they heard noises of something like flowing water.

“Um... Does anyone else hear that?”

Even though everyone was on guard, Virgo was the first to notice. At first, she thought she was just hearing things but quickly changed that opinion. She wasn’t just hearing things. There actually was flowing water, and the sound was getting louder. Sei and the others should have heard it by now. Kross sunk into thought, wondering what it could be, and his face paled when he realized what the sound was.

“C-Crap! Everyone, gather around me!”

“Huh?”

“There’s no time to explain! Hurry!”

Galvanized by Kross’s shout, Sei and the others gathered, still wondering what was going on. But Kross had no time to explain. He simply set up a barrier around all of them. He was acting as if they were about to get attacked, and that set Sei and the others on edge.

In the end, there was no need for an explanation. And that was because the origin of the sound—a torrent of water that filled the entire passageway—bore down on them.

“Grk!”

The barrier Kross set up creaked under the pressure of the flowing water. The dome was five meters in radius. The small space secured by the barrier was the only safe spot in the entire passageway right now.

Sei was reminded of an underwater tunnel he'd traveled through once on vacation back in Japan. *I wonder if traveling through a tunnel in rapid waters would look like this?* Sei thought, rather inappropriately. It wasn't as if he were feeling relaxed, like he had the leeway for those thoughts. In fact, it was the opposite. The danger forced upon him was so sudden that all his thoughts were in chaos. But that was only natural.

Right now, everything outside of where he was was currently buried under a torrent of water. If they'd been caught in that, they'd surely have been dashed upon the rocky walls, and the hero party would probably have met their end trapped under the water, unable to breathe. The force of the water itself was also unmatched.

Kross' barrier bent, and cracks formed on it.

“Hey, what's the meaning of this?! Weren't the devilfolk not supposed to get in here?!” Gantz sounded like he was panicking.

“I-It looks like Petto's prediction was wrong... Gah... He's clearly already forced his way through the barrier!” Kross responded in an equally strained voice.

This water wasn't natural. It was a spell cast by someone with clear hostility—most likely Mercurius—which meant that Mercurius himself was here. But luckily, that also meant that this torrent wouldn't continue on forever. As long as they managed to bear with the onslaught for some time, it would most likely stop. But lasting through that time would be a difficult feat.

Kross was one of the foremost heaven-arts practitioners in the world, but there was nothing he could do about the absolute level difference. Kross was currently level 105, and he could use the strongest heaven-arts and magic in the world. But he was trying to oppose a fearsome devilfolk soldier whose level was 300. He wasn't someone Kross could stand against on his own.

Eventually, Kross' barrier shattered, but that was when Virgo raised her hand.

“Vindemiatrix!”

The torrent of water simply vanished along with Virgo's declaration. She had used an advanced skill that dispersed all the mana in a designated area. Its effect of dispersing mana worked on any and all magic, and it was capable of dealing irreparable damage if cast on beings who maintained their body with mana.

Unaware of the dumbfounded stare Kross was giving her, Virgo made all the water vanish.

“R-Right now, that was... No way... But that was definitely mana dispersal! It’s an ability only available to the Goddess and her trusted custodians of the world!”

“Huh?”

“M-Miss Virgo... Just who are you?!”

Virgo’s eyes opened wide after Kross started spewing all those unfamiliar things. Even if he asked her about the world’s custodians, Virgo had never been aware of them and had no knowledge pertaining to them. The ability she just used was something her grandmother had taught her when she was young for self-defense, saying, “Against devilfolk, this’ll mean instant death!” While she felt like it would be overkill for just self-defense, that was still all Virgo thought of the skill.

But that wasn’t actually the case. The skill was only available to a select few. At the very least, it wasn’t available to most of humanity. Of course it wasn’t. Originally, it’d only been available to the clan of people that the Goddess trusted and supported to manage the world... It was a divine ability that was only taught to the direct descendants of Aeneas, the first human.

In the world today, there were only four people who could use it. One was, of course, the Goddess. One was Parthenos, who had once served the Goddess. Then there was the master Parthenos currently served, Lufas Maphaahl. Lastly was Parthenos’s successor, Virgo.

The ability to disperse mana without question... In a world rife with mana like Mizgarz, it was an unparalleled ability, a godly miracle worthy of being claimed as cheating. Since all magic was comprised of mana, using this skill would easily invalidate any spell. The mana engines that Megrez had invented would all cease to work, and if used on the devilfolk, they would be dealt massive damage. On top of that, the damage would never heal, since they were created of mana itself. Things like level gaps meant nothing in the face of this skill. While Virgo might not be able to erase all of a spell if there was too much mana in it, her skill would always have some effect. In other words, this skill would always work, even against an opponent of level 1000.

“Huh? Who? I’m just a normal heaven-winged girl who’s been living in the forest until recently...”

Kross must have thought that Virgo was messing with him with that response. He shouted, clearly upset, and grabbed her shoulder. “Normal? *NORMAL*?! As if! No normal heaven-winged would be able to disperse mana itself! Even the Sky King wouldn’t be able to!”

“Ahhhh?!”

Apparently Kross was the type to be calm and rational normally

but panic and act rashly as soon he was met with something beyond his understanding. But the sight of a grown elf grabbing at and hounding a heaven-winged girl with bloodshot eyes did not look good.

Thinking that he'd gone too far, Sei hurried to peel Kross off of Virgo and get between them. "What do you think you're doing, Kross?! Now's not the time for that! We don't know when the next attack will come!"

"B-But!"

"Don't but me! Right now we need to decide on whether we need to stop the person who assaulted us with this spell or climb the mountain!"

Sei was right. Now wasn't the time to be interrogating friends. Their plans had gone completely pear-shaped, and everything they'd assumed had been proven wrong. They'd climbed this mountain under the assumption that the Seven Luminaries wouldn't be able to get in themselves, but disastrously, Mercurius had managed to get in before them. This meant that while they had managed to survive the first blow, the second would be coming at any moment.

They would all have to choose. Should they retreat for now or proceed while fully aware of the risks?

"The kid's right. Whether we go forward or turn back, we need to make a decision soon."

"I agree with Gantz. Let's hurry up and keep going."

"No, I think we should go back. As we are now, the enemy can just attack all they like with magic, and we'll never even see him. If we keep letting him target us like this, we'll be wiped out."

Gantz and Jean, who had the most travel experience in the whole group, agreed with Sei, but their opinions were the complete opposite. Jean wanted to move forward, while Gantz wanted to turn back.

It's times like these I'm reminded that they really are a mercenary and an adventurer. They're used to rough situations like this.

"I think Gantz has the right idea here. We should retreat."

"I'd rather push forward. I mean, if we retreat, we'll lose the elixir."

Nick and Shuu, who were both adventurers and both not very memorable, split their opinions too. Going forward was dangerous, but retreating meant giving up on the elixir. If they gave up on the elixir, the country would fall without the dragon, even if they themselves managed to survive. Even so, forcing their way forward was too dangerous. And that was how the opinions of the group were split, prolonging the conversation.

"I don't really care either way."

Aries voiced his noncommittal opinion, and he actually was fine with either outcome. To him, the Seven Luminaries were an easy

opponent, so moving forward was no problem. But the guardian dragon's health was also something Aries just didn't care about. Even if they let the elixir slip through their hands and the country was destroyed, all that would mean to Aries was that one of the awful countries that had betrayed Lufas would be gone. In fact, he'd be happy about that.

"Um, I think it'd be okay with moving forward."

"I recommend retreating. Oh... Looks like we're split again."

"I, not smart. So will obey, everyone decision."

Virgo and the female knight's opinions differed once again, still leaving everyone evenly split. Richard showed no willingness to decide for himself, and Kross was completely useless in this scenario, which meant that the last person to vote would naturally be making the decision for the whole group.

Everyone's gazes focused on the hero. Sei broke into a cold sweat from the pressure and responsibility of everyone's looks, but he still managed to speak clearly.

"Let's keep going... I... I think the reason he's hiding and launching attacks from a distance like this is because he thinks of us as a threat and just wants us to leave. He forced himself through this anti-mana barrier, so it should have had some effect on him at least. Fighting here is probably bad for him. It was probably thanks to this mountain that Kross was able to defend against so much of his earlier attack. I'm sure if we were outside, he would have been able to bust through Kross' barrier much quicker."

"Y-You have a point. That definitely makes sense."

"So I think we should keep going. Right now, he's the one backed into a corner."

Several people breathed a sigh of relief and admiration after seeing Sei make such an unexpectedly calm judgment of the situation. While he was still weak, Sei's ability to process and understand the situation was pretty good. Even Aries's impression of Sei improved a little as he was reminded of Lufas back when she had been an adventurer.

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"You've all got your healing items ready, right? Let's go!"

"Wait, Lufas! There's a trap..."

"Don't worry about it. I've already set it off."

Ah... Oh well.

Ignoring Megrez and the others' warnings, she'd already brute-forced her way through all the traps by setting them off. Having decided that damage could just be healed, Lufas muscle-brained it and just kept moving forward, no matter if she was pierced by arrows,

squished by the walls, hit by a falling washbasin, or burned by flamethrowers. She kept her Ranger skill on just in case so she would avoid the traps that actually posed a threat to her life. Outside of that, she just kept jumping straight into the other ones, saying, incredibly, that it was faster to activate the traps and heal afterward than to disarm them.

This is just too much.

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“Well, I’m not that smart, so I might be wrong.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. You did good. I’m the one who’s wrong... It’s true that getting scared and turning tail in front of the enemy would probably be exactly what they want. Hey, guys. Sorry, but I’m changing my vote. I think we should keep going.” Gantz revised his opinion, convinced by Sei’s reasoning.

With this, there were now five people for proceeding versus two for going back. Nick and the female knight gave up and shrugged their shoulders. It seemed as if they’d made their peace with charging headfirst into danger.

Speed was now of the essence. The group needed to advance as fast as possible and crash in on the devilfolk ahead. The more spells he fired, the more exhausted he would be in battle. The key would be how many spells Mercurius would be able to get in before the battle properly started.

“Okay, let’s go! Kross, hurry up and get yourself together!” Gantz gripped Kross’s head and started running ahead. The rest of the group followed behind him, and they started climbing up the mountain’s caves.

This sacred mountain was curious, in that it was mostly hollow inside. The empty spaces formed a spiral incline leading upward, where the elixir was being kept at the top. In accordance with that structure, there was no place you could reach the elixir from the outside, so the entire mountain was like a natural fortress.

The enemy has to be at the top! There could be no doubt, given the direction of the water torrent.

The natural conclusion was that Mercurius wanted them to leave. After all, because of the mountain’s layout, it would be impossible for him to leave unnoticed as long as Sei and his group were still around.. In other words, he wouldn’t be able to sneak out with the elixir.

Sei was correct in his reasoning. This sacred mountain with its sealed mana was basically a dead end. Mercurius had jumped into a trap of his own will, lured by the elixir. He knew this. *Right now, he’s the one in trouble!*

“The second wave is coming!”

A second torrent of water rushed its way towards Gantz and the rest of the group behind him.

Like I thought. He's up ahead!

Ahead of them, Mercurius was already in check with the elixir. Mercurius's mistake was his ignorance of Virgo.

She once again raised her hand in front of her. "Vindemiatrix!"

The devilfolk's Water spell was unilaterally erased.

Magic was a skill that gathered mana and converted it into physical phenomena, and because of that, Virgo's skill was all-powerful against it. The skill was the natural enemy of all magic users. Just having one person capable of using it on the enemy's side would render any magic user worthless.

Seeing the water disappear, Jean whistled in appreciation, and he gave heartfelt praise to Virgo's efforts. "That's amazin', missy! I guess powerful people pop up in the most unexpected places, don't they?"

"No, I'm not that strong."

"Aw, don't be so modest! Believe in yourself! I'm telling you, you're plenty strong!"

The hero's party continued up the slope and eventually reached the top—the room where the elixir was stored. In front of the room was the pitiful wreckage of a golem that had probably been the elixir's guardian. Sei and the others had most likely been meant to fight this thing originally. And they also knew who had done this already.

Looking up from the wreckage, Sei and the rest saw a devilfolk man holding a small bottle, glaring at the heroes with a dangerous look.

Looks like we managed to corner him. Now all we need to do is beat him.

Sei and the rest of the group readied their weapons, fully prepared for what was to come.

15

Aries sunk into thought. *About what time would be right for me to intervene in this fight? Maybe I shouldn't intervene at all.*

It would be easy for Aries to take care of Mercurius here. No matter how much the attribute match-up favored the other side, the gap between them was more than just "hard to fill," since Aries more than doubled Mercurius's level. It went way past mere advantage and disadvantage all the way to Aries being able to use brute-force to defeat Mercurius pretty much however he wanted.

In the past, Aries had a hard time against Levia, a water golem. But without something that absurd, the level gap would be impossible to close. Levia was made out of an entire lake's worth of mana-filled

water, and mana had the effect of enhancing things, living or not, like with level-ups. Fundamentally, golems could not be imbued with mana, since creating them with matter made from magic meant that whatever had been created would eventually disperse and return to its natural form. But Megrez had used mana in its pure form, before it was used in magic, and embedded a large amount of it into water, thereby getting around that flaw and creating a contradictory golem with vast amounts of mana.

I don't like him, but I have to give him credit for that. He deserves his title.

Back to the subject at hand, Aries could claim victory over Mercurius without much effort. He'd probably be a little more difficult than other members of the Seven Luminaries, but that was it. All the attribute match-up managed to achieve was making Mercurius a little tougher and more annoying. Aries's victory was still assured.

But Aries still had to think. *If I intervene, will that be good for Virgo?*

Any other member of the Twelve Heavenly Stars would probably have intervened without a second thought. They wouldn't have cared if their disguises had been broken. They'd have jumped at the chance to eliminate a member of the Seven Luminaries, and that would've been correct.

Virgo was even with the Seven Luminaries in level, so she wasn't guaranteed to win. There wasn't really any need to bother risking it; Aries could just take care of the whole thing. And that would be "correct." But Aries empathized with Virgo.

Aries was different from the rest of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. The rest of them were strong by birth. Libra was the strongest golem. Aigokeros was the king of all demons in hell. Karkinos was the pinnacle of all shelled monsters of the sea, and Scorpius was the queen of all scorpions. Parthenos had been the chieftess of a clan that served the Goddess. The other Twelve Heavenly Stars were things like the queen of the fairies or the son of the Goddess. None of them would lose in strength to even the strongest of all monsters. The Twelve Heavenly Stars, except for Aries, were a mighty group consisting of all the strongest class of elite beings gathered from every corner of the world.

Normally, all of them would've been legends in the areas they resided in, shouldering the balance of the world and spreading fear to the rest of it. If Lufas hadn't gathered them all under her banner, they'd probably be enemies vying for supremacy among themselves. The Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars was a group consisting of only the elite, the strongest of all those superior specimens gathered from every area of the world.

But Aries was different. He just happened to be lucky. He was part

of the group because he'd been the first one to be captured and because Lufas had come to like him. Otherwise, he was just a weak monster. Normally, he'd never have been able to rub shoulders with the others in a million years. In fact, he was so weak that he wouldn't have even been able to do so with normal-class monsters. That was just the kind of species Aries was.

So Aries understood how Virgo felt. He understood the feelings of the weak. Right now, Virgo was just like Aries had been a long time ago. She was surrounded by strong people and unable to gain confidence. She was being endlessly assaulted by feelings of inferiority. She was no longer able to understand her own worth, ruled by doubts like, *What am I doing here? Am I really needed? and, Shouldn't I open up my position for someone better?*

Aries wasn't sure if she was as lost as he had been once upon a time, but she should still be having the same thoughts. So Aries decided not to act. After all, it would be extremely frustrating for her if he did. Imagine if the second something seemed even a little dangerous, another member of the Twelve Heavenly Stars interrupted, even though she could have won that fight. Not to mention that she'd been told more than once that she was weak. She'd definitely think, *Ahh, why am I this weak?* Aries was convinced that she'd feel frustrated, miserable, and pathetic. She might even lose sleep over it. Aries knew the feeling.

You weakling. Don't you dare put something like yourself on the same level as me. Aries had never forgotten what the Lion King had said as he'd ridiculed him. He could still hear it ringing in his ears.

The other members of the Twelve Heavenly Stars would never understand this feeling, since they were all strong without exception. So Aries suppressed his desire to just jump in and punch the living daylights out of the member of the Seven Luminaries in front of him.

Not yet... I can't act yet. Jumping in now would be like saying to Virgo that she couldn't win and should just give up. Nothing'll change like this, and she'll never gain any confidence. So not yet... I have to watch over her.

"What...are you?"

"Huh? Me?"

"Who else?" Mercurius fixed Virgo with a clearly hostile stare as he questioned her.

Being exposed to that hostility, Virgo was bewildered. *Even if you ask me "what," I have no idea what you mean.*

In Virgo's mind, she was only part of the Twelve Heavenly Stars because she'd inherited the position from her grandma. She herself didn't have the requisite power. But it seemed like the man from the Seven Luminaries was really wary of her for some reason.

Mercurius swiftly drew up a magic circle and announced to Virgo

in a low voice, “No, it doesn’t matter who or what you are... I can’t allow anyone who can use that skill to live. I will eliminate you here with all my might!”

Along with that declaration, a bullet of compressed water shot out from Mercurius’s palm.



Yes, it was just water, but the compressed water was shot out at high speeds. It was turned into a deadly weapon that could crush rock.

As soon as the attack had been made, everyone scattered, and the water bullet impacted fruitlessly on the rock wall behind them, easily destroying it. If it had hit a person, they would probably have sustained major injuries.

“Oohhhhhh!”

Gantz was the first one to take action. He swung his giant war ax, which was one of the gifts from the Grave that he'd gotten from the king on the day of their departure. It had no special effect. It was simply heavy and powerful, but it suited Gantz very well. It had more power behind it than any of the other axes Gantz had to make do with by employing every trick in his book.

As a testament to its power, it cleaved straight through Mercurius and continued to destroy the floor as well, raising up a cloud of dust. But such an attack wasn't enough to change Mercurius's expression even a little.

“Useless. Such an attack will never work on me.”

“Ha! I bet! But it'll take a little while for your body to go back to normal, won't it?!”

The attack won't work. It won't do any damage. Yeah. I get that. You're right. But so what?

Gantz wore a bestial smile as he swung his ax more, cutting Mercurius into slivers. His goal was never to hurt Mercurius. Gantz already knew from Petto that physical attacks wouldn't deal any damage, which meant that the only way to finish the battle was through magic. Gantz understood that his role in this fight would be to go out in front and disrupt the enemy in any way possible.

Mercurius's slashed body wriggled, and tentacles made of water shot towards Gantz. The tips of the tentacles were sharp and pointed, and it was obvious that they would be able to pierce through any normal armor.

Gantz's bestial smile only deepened, and instead of dodging, he only increased his efforts. As a result, all the tentacles pierced him, but Gantz's trained muscles managed to stop them. The water tentacles didn't reach anything important.

“Too weak! Hah!”

Gantz swung his ax again, cutting through Mercurius.

Normally, Mercurius' attack would have pierced straight through Gantz. He really was weakened. While it wasn't easy, Mercurius had been weakened enough that Gantz's defenses could prevent any real damage. Even so, Mercurius was still one of the Seven Luminaries. He was at least comparable even in simple physical strength.

Mercurius's arm flexed like a whip and sent Gantz flying. But the adventurers Jean and Nick stepped in to take Gantz's place, almost as if they had simply switched out.

"Let's go, Nick! Don't give him space to use magic!"

"I know!"

The cooperation between the two former adventurers who had been in a party together was smooth like butter. While Lufas had claimed that Jean and Nick were weak and unneeded, they were still some of the most skilled adventurers in the world.

Jean's sword and Nick's short sword tore Mercurius apart, giving him no time to cast magic. Shuu continuously provided support fire with his bow from behind. By aiming at Mercurius's fingers, he prevented the devilfolk from being able to draw any magic circles. They didn't have to think about winning. Their job this time wasn't to clinch victory, after all. All they needed to do was buy time until their friends could defeat the enemy. That was the job of the entire front line in this battle.

"Don't underestimate me. You fools don't even know your own place." Mercurius sounded annoyed as he launched a tentacle at Virgo.

But the attack never reached her. It was interrupted by a large armored man, Richard, who took the attack instead. The attack did manage to inflict damage, enough to go through the man's armor, but it wasn't lethal. As long as it wasn't lethal, Virgo could just heal them up with heaven-arts.

And Virgo was frighteningly fast! Gantz was already fully healed, as was Richard, even though he'd just taken a hit.

"So irritating!" Mercurius yelled, punching Jean in the gut.

Just one strike broke his ribs, and blood spilled from Jean's mouth.

Mercurius went further, kicking Nick away and getting both adventurers away from him. Using that opening, he cast a motionless spell! Completely skipping the usually necessary magic circle, he instantly ripped out blades of water that flew throughout the room. However, Mercurius's spell that had been cast without any requisite motion didn't have much power to it.

Virgo put up a barrier and easily defended against it. All that'd been accomplished was that Mercurius had found out that wouldn't be enough to finish the fight at all.

"Yaaahhh!"

Sei kicked off and jumped in, swiping with his sword. He wasn't to be underestimated; it wasn't just a physical attack. With the Chosen class, Sei's skills exercised unexpected effects. "Magic Break" was one of them, a skill only available to the hero, Sei. Its effect was to

damage the opponent's SP instead of HP. It was a back-line killer and also contained a limited ability to disperse mana. In other words, it allowed Sei's physical attack to deal real damage to Mercurius. Warriors also had a similar skill in their tree, but only Chosen obtained the skill this early.

However, Mercurius wasn't the type to just take the blow. He immediately solidified his body, changing it to ice. Then, using his hardened arm, Mercurius stopped Sei's attack and kicked his jaw as a counter.

"Gwoof!"

Sei flew backward, his body drawing an arc in the air.

But right afterward, a blade of light came flying at Mercurius. It was a slash of light from Virgo's blade. Even though Mercurius managed to dodge in the moment, Virgo was right there after he did so, having closed in using low-altitude flight.

Virgo's sword flashed! Her sword made contact with Mercurius, and his expression changed.

"Gkk! Agh...!"

It worked! Virgo's attack had some real effect, but her lack of battle experience worked against her as she let down her guard.

Mercurius instantly changed his focus to Virgo and swung his fist. He aimed for her neck. Having decided that it would be dangerous to not kill her in one blow, Mercurius bet it all on an instant kill. With perfect timing, the ground shook wildly, throwing off his stance and his aim. As a result, Mercurius missed his opportunity, and Virgo saw the chance to close in a second time and shave away at Mercurius with her sword.

That just now... It was that black-clad one! Just who is that man in all black...! Mercurius could tell that the one who'd caused the quake was the mysterious man in all black. The man stayed silent and acted as if he had completely ignored Mercurius's gaze, but that was even more disturbing.

The situation wasn't good for Mercurius. He had no choice but to admit that.

I understand now. I made a mistake.

I feared the revival of the guardian dragon with this elixir and made the mistake of coming to this mountain. I knew about the barrier and that I'd be weakened within it, but even so, I figured I could use the structure of the mountain to wash the heroes away with my magic. Even if I didn't, I should have at least been able to put them on alert enough to retreat.

How rash could I have been? It was my miscalculation. I never expected them to have someone who could neutralize magic.

Still, I thought I could win. I was confident I could come out on top against the heroes, even though I was weakened. But... That woman named

Virgo... She's way too much trouble. Because of her, any damage I deal will just be healed, and if I show even the slightest opening, she'll come in swinging.

The thought of defeat rose in Mercurius' mind along with a real sense of impending inevitability.

"No! I won't lose!" Mercurius shouted, encouraging himself before turning his whole body into a blade and attacking the heroes.

Right. I can't afford to lose. Even if this body is nothing but the Goddess's puppet, I'll never allow myself to just be something that exists to be defeated! No, I'm fine with that, actually. If that's my fate, then there's nothing for it.

But...

We devilfolk may just be puppets... But even puppets have something they want to protect!

In the back of his mind, Mercurius thought of the girl who'd been his childhood friend, who bore the crown of the moon. He thought of her smile. It was something Mercurius thought of as a treasure, even though he knew it would never be directed at him.

16

While he was being cornered, Mercurius thought back to what had happened before he'd come to this country.

The devilfolk were being made to dance. Mercurius had always thought that. He knew that they were a people of mana who would just spawn from somewhere and oppose humanity for no real reason. Mercurius also knew that if they ever stopped antagonizing humanity, they would turn into mana and die. It was as if they were a magic spell that could not fulfill its purpose.

I know I'm a puppet. I'm nothing more than a puppet given the role of attacking humans from birth... Even if I have a sense of self, I'm still just a human-shaped tool with no free will.

But why? For what purpose? Just who is making poor puppets like us?

While walking through the dim castle, Mercurius pondered his own *raison d'être*. *Even if I won, what would happen then? If we disappear, if we don't antagonize humans, then destroying humanity would be putting the cart before the horse. All that'll happen is that we'll self-destruct. Is the creator telling us to hurry up and disappear once our roles are over? How insane...*

"Mercurius!"

"Oh, it's you, Luna."

A girl with honey-colored hair stopped Mercurius. She was wearing light armor over purple inner-wear that emphasized ease of movement. It was clear she was trying to cross-dress, but it wasn't

working. The only ones who would be fooled by her dress would be idiots like Mars. She had her breasts bound in a wrap, but Mercurius knew she was pretty well stacked.

As she came running over, Mercurius turned to look at her with a puzzled expression. "Luna... What's going on with your skin and eyes?"

"Huh?"

The racial characteristics of devilfolk were blue or green skin and eyes with the whites and blacks reversed. Luna was no exception; she should have had those characteristics. But right now, Luna was standing in front of Mercurius with white skin and human-like eyes. Mercurius had only asked that question out of idle curiosity, but Luna clearly started to panic before answering as if she were clearly trying to come up with an excuse.

"Ah, no, uh... This is...infiltration! Yes, an infiltration mission. I won't be able to enter a human town if I don't look like a human, right?"

"There shouldn't be any point in staying in such a disguise here, though..."

"Ah... Uh... B-By being like this all the time, I can get used to it so I don't mess up in the field!"

That's a lie... Mercurius internally criticized her rash excuse.

When infiltrating a human town, devilfolk had to disguise themselves. Mercurius understood that. Jupiter did it too. In fact, Mars was basically the only idiot who would be caught dead anywhere near a human town without a disguise. That was no reason to be in human disguise all the time, though, especially because they'd be liable to be mistaken for a human and be attacked by other devilfolk.

Well, there was basically no one rude enough to attack a girl from the Seven Luminaries, and even if there were, Mercurius would kill them himself. By Mercurius' reckoning, Luna was doing this for another reason. It was probably because she was so conscious of Terra, who didn't look like a normal devilfolk person. In an attempt to get even a little closer to him, she'd changed her appearance to match. Mercurius forced down the jealousy that welled up inside him before similarly forcing his usually still facial muscles to stretch into a smile.

"It looks good on you. I don't really like humans, but that skin color doesn't look bad when it's you."

"R-Really? I-I'm happy."

"By the way, what did you need? You didn't just come to show me how you looked, right?" Mercurius asked even while internally thinking, *it would be nice if you did, though.*

His question prompted the girl to go, "Ah," like she'd just remembered something before moving on to explain the reason why

she'd called out to Mercurius. "That's right. Sir Terra's called for a gathering of the Seven Luminaries. Saturnus is already heading to the meeting room."

"Sir Terra did? Understood... I will be there immediately."

"Good. I'll be waiting for you there."

Mercurius breathed out a small sigh as he watched Luna run off ahead.

What a mess. I kind of don't like this. Her eyes don't look at me at all. She's always thinking of someone else. Should I call him a love rival? No... This is a little different. I never had a chance, so he wouldn't really be a rival.

Well, I know I just got what was coming to me, though. I'm blunt and generally not good with words. I'm gloomy, too, and I never really say what's on my mind. There's no way I'd ever be able to get my affection across to the person I like. If I could be as obvious as Luna is, she'd probably notice, but that'd be impossible for me. I always reflexively play it cool and hide what I'm feeling.

"Just go explode. Sir Terra, that is." Mercurius muttered in a whisper before heading to the meeting room.

When he opened the door, the first thing he laid eyes on was the seven-sided table symbolizing the elements. The Moon and Earth seats were already occupied. Fire, Wood, Sun, and Metal were all empty, but that couldn't be helped. Mars and Jupiter were dead, while Venus had turned traitor. The man who held the Sun seat—Sol, the one who should have been leading them—was suspected of having been brainwashed by Venus and was excluded from the meeting.

Mercurius took his place at the Water seat before looking towards their leader, Terra, who wasn't sitting in any of the places.

"It's really empty, isn't it?" The woman in the Earth seat, Saturnus of Earth, said with her chin resting in her hands.

The Seven Luminaries weren't a friendly bunch at all. They were more like a disorderly group of people who would strike at any opening given. But having four out of the seven members missing like this would give anyone pause.

Maybe if we cooperated instead of just glaring at each other from across this table this could have been prevented? No, probably not... Thinking back, Mercurius remembered that a certain bomb (Venus) had been right there, making sure everyone had been glaring at each other.

"You're all here." Terra's gaze swept over the table, confirming everyone's presence, though there were only three people to confirm. "I believe some of you already know, but Venus was a traitor. No, rather than a traitor, I should say that she was never one of us. We have been manipulated by her all this time, resulting in unnecessary

losses.”

Until just recently—a scant few weeks, even—the devilfolk had held absolute superiority in their war against humans. The Seven Luminaries were certainly fearsome, but it was only while they had members of the Twelve Heavenly Stars on their side—Aigokeros and Scorpius and Aries—that they had nothing to fear from anybody or anything other than Benetnasch.

But thinking back on it, that had probably been a trap set by Venus. While they’d been relaxed and overconfident in their superiority, Mars and Jupiter had been erased. As a further blow, they’d lost Aigokeros, Aries, and Scorpius. Before they’d noticed, their positions had completely flipped, and the devilfolk had been backed into a position where it was doubtful if they could even win against the forces of humanity, let alone Lufas and her lot. At this point, there was no time to be glaring at each other.

Terra explained all this to the three remaining Luminaries, and they listened with serious expressions.

“We cannot afford any more losses. So from now on, you all are to observe Lufas and her party, but make sure to never make contact with them under any circumstances.”

Normally, this would be the time to hole up in the castle and see what happened. The humans might once again make enemies of Lufas, and they might destroy each other. Even if they didn’t, Benetnasch and Leon would certainly clash with Lufas, at least. The devilfolk were driven by circumstances that wouldn’t allow them to do that, though. They were a flawed species that would disappear if they didn’t assault humanity... Even if they wanted to cease hostilities, they couldn’t. The only thing they could do was avoid Lufas, Benetnasch, and Leon to the best of their abilities and attack other targets.

“I’d do that even if you didn’t tell me to. There’s no way I’d want to fight a monster like her. Anyway, looks like it’ll just be some boring routine work, like crushing small villages, for a while.”

“Saturnus... Attacking non-combatants so much is...”

“You’re as stuffy as always, Luna. You know that we’re the ones who have to do this, otherwise we’ll die? I’m amazed how you can be an assassin like this. Actually, wait a second. What’s up with your eyes and skin?”

“Huh? Uh, this is...”

Terra cleared his throat to stop Saturnus and Luna’s frivolous conversation before resuming the meeting. Although basically the only thing they did that day was come up with some countermeasures for Lufas and her group, only things like trying to predict where Lufas currently was or estimating just how much power she held. The reason they didn’t know her precise location was because all the

monsters and devilfolk they'd sent out for reconnaissance had been sniped and eliminated. It was most likely the work of Libra of the Scales.

By switching perspectives and focusing on where their reconnaissance was still alive, it would be possible to largely tell what area she was in and what direction she was heading. However, that would entail a large number of sacrifices. And because of Libra's huge range and Lufas's hyper-fast traveling speeds, the number of sacrifices they'd have to make just wasn't worth the information they would get, especially since it wouldn't be very accurate anyway.

It was only an estimate, but it was thought that Lufas and Co. could move around one hundred kilometers in an hour. On top of that, her flight speed was swift enough that she could fly halfway around Mizgarz in minutes, judging from the speed at which Lufas herself had once moved from near Gjallarhorn to Laevateinn. Actually, given her fight with the Devil King, her maximum burst-speed could actually be several times or even tens of times faster... If she were able to keep up that speed for long distances or times, she could even make a lap around Mizgarz in a single second. What a monster. For short distances, her speed must have seemed like teleportation.

At any rate, even if they could figure out where she was currently, such information would likely already be useless by the time Terra was informed. After all, Lufas could lap around the world several times before the familiar used for scouting would even be able to make it back, so the information it would have would be less than reliable, to say the least.

With the meeting over, Mercurius made a beeline for the throne room, where the Devil King most likely was.

Fighting while avoiding Lufas? That's fine with me, but it doesn't do anything about the fundamental problem. Even if we devilfolk manage to win this war, we'll still just disappear. The only way to change this is to change our very existence... In other words, we need to change the rules that the Goddess wrote.

If we don't, the devilfolk have no future.

"Your Majesty. Please excuse me."

Mercurius stepped into the throne room and bowed before his lord.

It seemed that the Devil King had fought some huge battle somewhere recently, and he was busy recovering. Still, his wounds weren't exactly severe, and he was leisurely reposed upon his throne as if he weren't wounded at all.

He narrowed his eyes in amusement at Mercurius's visit.

"Mercurius, I see. What do you need?"

"Your Majesty... I beg of you to lend me your power."

“Hmm... I will listen.”

“Thank you! I am aware of how rude I am being when I ask you this. But I beg of you to use your ‘Key to the Heavens,’ officially titled the ‘GM Key,’ once for us devilfolk.”

The Key to the Heavens was an item that only appeared in legends, something only a representative of the Goddess was allowed to hold. It was a divine tool that could bend the rules and providence of the world itself. In the past, the Goddess had given it to the first human, Aeneas, and it was passed down from generation to generation within his clan. Then, the Goddess spread the knowledge to all races across the world that even touching the key when one wasn't her representative was the gravest of sins. Aiming for the key was nothing but a declaration of war on the Goddess herself.

Thus, throughout history, no villain, monster, or even devilfolk dared to lay a hand on Aeneas' clan. No matter how foolish they were, they couldn't defy the Goddess. They didn't want to. Two hundred years ago, someone appeared who picked a fight with the established order, and that person was Lufas Maphaahl. She boldly trespassed into the clan's sanctuary and brought the chieftess, Parthenos, out along with the key.

After that, the key was left with Gemini, the Twins of the Twelve Heavenly Stars, to safekeep on the ship the *Argo*. Gemini exerted the greatest combat power among all of Lufas's subordinates, and the key was thought to be safe in their hands even now.

Mercurius had a suspicion that the key was no longer on the *Argo* at all. The Devil King had gone on an expedition right after his battle with Lufas. There were very few opponents he would bother bringing as large a force against as he'd done. One was the Lion King Leon and his army. The other was the Vampire Princess Benetnasch and her city of Mjolnir. The last was Lufas Maphaahl and the Twelve Heavenly Stars under her.

All of them were alive and well, with no traces that they'd fought the Devil King. Well, Lufas had, but her battle had happened before the expedition. There was only one other candidate. It could only have been the *Argo*, with their large force of heroic spirits. This meant that the key was now in the Devil King's hands. At least, that was what Mercurius had deduced.

“So you know that I have it...”

“Please excuse me... I took the liberty of doing some research.”

“Hmm... Then I will listen to you. What would you have me use the key for?”

The Devil King was in high spirits. He was amused by Mercurius. *I need to get to the point while he's in this mood.* Mercurius swallowed his saliva and answered while trying to keep his nervousness from

showing on his face.

“Please make us devilfolk... No, you can just do it for one person. Please save her from our fate. The only one who can do so is the one with the key, and that is you.”

17

Mercurius had but one wish, and it wasn't for glory, honor, or the victory of the devilfolk. He was even willing to give up his own life for it. There was only one person he wanted to save. Just one person... As long as the girl he'd one-sidedly fallen in love with lived, he was happy.

That was why he'd proposed an exchange with the Devil King. He'd promised the Devil King the lifeblood, or possibly the entire body, of Draupnir's guardian dragon. The lifeblood of the guardian dragon held a large amount of mana in it, and it would increase the abilities of any creature that drank it. Mercurius knew that it was far too valuable for the Devil King to ignore. Basically, it was what Lufas would've referred to as a stat-boosting item, and it was one of the highest quality.

Of course, there was no way Mercurius would be able to win in a straight fight, but now it was different. A certain being had poisoned it with something that could not be removed, so the guardian dragon was eminently defeatable.

I can't... I can't lose. This isn't the time to be laid low by the hero!

“I will win! Even if I have to sell my soul to a demon—no, a god!”

Virgo's sword ripped through Mercurius's body.

Even if he tried to retaliate, the others would interfere, rendering his offense moot.

The spells Kross fired from the rear dealt a small but steady amount of damage, and any wounds Mercurius managed to deal were being healed almost immediately. It was an unwinnable battle against their numbers, no matter how superior he was to any of them individually. Added to that the fact that Mercurius was weakened by the terrain itself, he stood no chance, even if he was one of the Seven Luminaries.

Also, the hero was more troublesome than Mercurius had expected. Normally, the Chosen class was a hidden one that could only be accessed after having mastered all three types of Warrior, as well as the Swordmaster class. Even two hundred years ago in the Age of Heroes, only one man had managed to reach this peak—Alioth.

But the hero here had managed to start with that class. It was absurd! His level and his combat ability just didn't match up. Using Observing Eye, Mercurius knew that his level was under 40. Even so,

his strength was already on par with the mercenary, Gantz.

I can't win like this.

Even Mercurius, as one of the Seven Luminaries, couldn't overturn this situation. So he made a wish to the one being he shouldn't. And a voice answered the question he asked in his heart.

"O weak puppet, do you desire strength?"

A beating sound like an excited heart rang in Mercurius' ears as something with a huge presence spoke to him. For a moment, an image popped up in the back of his mind: an otherworldly beauty with long, flowing blue hair the color of the sea. She had a similar face to Venus's, who had once been his comrade, but the power of this woman was nowhere near comparable.

That was when Mercurius realized. *Ah, it's her. She is our creator.*
No. Our caster.

"Hmph, so even my desperate struggles are nothing but theater for you, huh? Well, that's fine by me. I'll be your puppet. I'll become a bit part in your shit play. So Goddess! Give me power! Enough that I'll never lose to anyone!"

I think I can see her sneering with a chuckle. Yeah. She's laughing at me. She's looking down on me.

I know already. I'll never be able to go back if I do this, right?

Mercurius instinctively knew that he was about to go down a path of no return. By discarding "Mercurius the devilfolk," a completed spell, and creating a new one with power jacked up past eleven, he would no longer be Mercurius. He would just be a powerful Water spell.

Mercurius lost his form, melting into something like an amoeba. He could feel himself losing his own sense of self.

"All right."

Mercurius's body was filled with an amazing and terrifying amount of divine power. Everyone else's expressions froze upon seeing a devilfolk emit a holy light that should have never been emitted from him. The sudden development exceeded their ability to process the situation. Mercurius's transformation was incredible. He lost his human form, melting into a liquid. On top of that, the water that he was made up of had clearly gained in volume, and the huge amount of water rushed forward like an avalanche, threatening to swallow up the hero and his group.

Virgo and Kross managed to react and put up a shield, but they didn't seem like they'd last long.

Aries discarded his black robe and jumped forward. Covering his fist in flames, Aries struck! Using massive strength that belied his appearance, Aries struck the blob that used to be Mercurius with enough power to crack the earth.

But although Aries's target was blown back, it wasn't hurt. Some

of the water had evaporated, but it grew back very quickly.

“Huh? What? Wh-Who?!”

Sei was confused by Aries’s sudden appearance, but Aries himself had no time to answer. Aries, immediately realizing that this battlefield was no good for him, shot flame bullets from his fists to melt the wall, creating a large hole. Then, he picked Virgo up and leapt out of the hole without even consulting her. Together, they escaped from the area.

“H-Hey, isn’t that the girl—no wait, boy—who was in Svel...?”

“The hell’re you talkin’ about, old man?! I’m not super sure what’s goin’ on, but we gotta make tracks too! This place is dangerous!”

Gantz was surprised, since he’d seen Aries once, but no one else had any idea what he was talking about. What they did understand was that the girl(?) was clearly a different person than the man in black from the hunting festival, and that she’d probably somehow replaced him.

The rest of the group, except for Sei, hurried to escape from the hole Aries had opened. Sei ran the opposite way, seeming to have noticed something. He ran and picked up a small bottle that’d fallen to the ground before following the rest out of the hole. Right afterward, the room completely filled with water, which started to engulf the sacred mountain itself.

Before that, Sei and the rest of the group slid down the mountain in an almost superhuman show of physical ability, regrouping with Petto, who hurried over to them.

“Wh-What happened, all of you?!”

“I don’t know! Mercurius suddenly transformed...”

“Th-That’s Mercurius?!”

Kross answered Petto’s question roughly, clearly unable to get over his confusion, but it was only natural for him to have no idea what was going on. One of the Seven Luminaries transforming was something without precedent. The mass of water didn’t even have a shadow of Mercurius left now as it roared and continued to increase in volume. At this rate, it wouldn’t just engulf the mountain, it would swallow all of Draupnir.

“Hey, Kross... What do we even do about this? There’s no way my ax will work, will it?” Gantz’s gaze was far-off as he asked Kross, but he never expected an answer.

“E-Even magic’s useless on that thing, so don’t ask me!”

Just as he had expected, Kross didn’t, and everyone fell into silence. In the end, everyone’s opinions were united. *There’s nothing we can do. That thing is just impossible for humans to deal with.*

“W-Wait a second, Aries! Where are we going?!”

“Huh? We’re meeting back up with Miss Lufas, of course.”

Aries was still carrying Virgo as he jumped through the tops of trees in the forest, trying to get away from Mercurius. At the very least, Aries would never lose to Mercurius, but there was no doubt the current situation was rather troublesome. Aries couldn’t discount the improbable happening if he tried to fight while protecting Virgo, so he decided to prioritize the mission given to him by Lufas; he prioritized Virgo’s safety. He’d actually wanted to have Virgo fight and win so she could gain some confidence, but now that there was serious danger to her life, he couldn’t afford to do that.

I need to meet up with Miss Lufas to make sure Virgo’s safe.

“Meet up...? But what about everyone else?!”

“Hmm? Well they’ll just have to do their best to run... No, I guess that’s impossible. That water is increasing faster than they can run.”

“Then don’t we have to go back?!”

Aries didn’t really care about some humans who he didn’t actually know. To be perfectly honest, he didn’t even really care if this country got wiped out or not either. Aries was fundamentally calm and peaceful, and he was one of the easiest to negotiate with among the Twelve Heavenly Stars. But the basis for his motivations were in the following order:

1) Lufas

2) Lufas

3) Lufas

4) Lufas

5) Everything Else

On top of that, the “everything else” category was eighty percent friends and family. He actually allotted almost no emotional space for anybody outside of that. In the end, Aries was a sheep. He prioritized his herd. Aries was the type to watch the leader make a mistake and do the same thing right afterward anyway. Basically, he just didn’t care much about anyone outside his circle. But for all that, he’d be willing to go to the ends of the earth for a person once he warmed up to them.

“Everyone else is still there. We need to save them!”

“You want me to buy time for them to escape? That much water is gonna be a huge pain...”

“But you can do it. Right, Aries?”

“Well, yeah...”

“Then please!”

Aries was happy to put his life on the line for people in his circle, but in his mind, fighting for anyone outside of that was just a waste of effort. On top of that, the hero was there. And the hero was basically

Lufas's enemy.

Why do I have to pick this meaningless fight to help the enemy? Aries wondered sincerely. But if I don't do this, Virgo might be hurt emotionally...

After a bit of thought, Aries decided to try to maintain Virgo's emotional state.

Judging by how they were fighting, the hero will be easy prey. If they show any signs of opposing us, I can just kill them somewhere Virgo won't see.

"Okay... I'll go back!"



Aries kicked off a tree and changed direction, turning back to the sacred mountain. He made sure to drop off Virgo at the very edge of the water's attack range.

"You make sure they get away, Virgo. I'll go play with that thing in the meantime."

"O-Okay, got it."

Having dropped off Virgo, Aries kicked off the ground, traveling even faster than he had been before. Then, with plenty of momentum, he enveloped himself in fire and tackled the mass of water. Aries pierced through both Mercurius and the mountain itself, coming out again on the other side. Then, he turned around and charged in a second time. Once again, he went straight through and came out the other side, evaporating any water in his path. But right after, the water filled back in.

There was looking to be no end to this battle. It seemed to be converting nearby mana into water to add to its mass, so burning it would effectively do nothing if something wasn't done about the mana in the area as well.

"Well then, it looks like I'll just have to try some stuff out."

Aries once again charged in, but this time he swung his fist up towards the sky. The shockwave generated huge winds, forming a tornado that launched Mercurius upward into the air. Aries jumped after it, slamming several dozen kicks wreathed in fire into it in a single second. Aries continued to kick, punch, and tackle through Mercurius, all the while using trees and boulders as platforms to jump off of, continuing to attack the blob of water faster than it could fall. From the outside, it looked like a bullet of rainbow-colored flame was zooming around freely, showering a huge water monster with blows.

Dodging a tentacle of water that was launched at him, Aries shot fire from his hands like a vernier thruster to accelerate in the air. He closed the gap between them. Then, Aries put his all into a single kick. The resultant shockwave sent Mercurius flying. As soon as that happened, Aries wasted no time in stretching out his arms.

"Haaahhhh...!"

Aries shot out a hail of fire bullets. He fired, fired, and fired some more! The plan was to see if it was possible to evaporate the water faster than it regenerated or maybe even completely disintegrate it. The bullets of fire Ares shot carved out chunks of Mercurius over and over, the evaporated water returning to mana once it could no longer maintain its shape. The mass of water, which was bigger than the mountain, visibly shrank until it was eventually about the size of the original Mercurius.

It didn't matter to Aries how big Mercurius had gotten. After all,

Aries's attacks all inflicted percent damage. It worked equally well on all things, no matter what they were.

"Mesarthim!"

Aries raised both hands, generating a giant ball of fire. This fire was the source of Aries's percentile damage and his special ability. Its effect was to deal percentile damage to any enemy touching it, which meant that long, drawn-out battles were in Aries's favor.

Aries threw the ball of fire, enveloping Mercurius with it. If Lufas were watching, she may have retorted, "I told you, it's not that kind of skill."

"O-Oogghhhh! OOOOOGGHH!" Mercurius screamed his death throes as his body disappeared.

As long as the flames didn't disappear, he would continue to burn forever. It was probably hell for him. By continuously dealing percentile damage, the opponent would eventually be left at 1 HP, which wouldn't be able to be taken away by percentages. The flames that continued to burn Mercurius were basically an attack that would continuously apply percentile damage as long as it wasn't extinguished. It was much scarier than any normal amount of fixed damage.

Eventually, Mercurius was shrunk to a tiny fragment of water, his HP obviously at 1. Aries shot a single flame bullet, evaporating the last bit of water and completely obliterating Mercurius. Normally, that would have been the end. Mercurius had been completely evaporated, so there was no way for the fight to continue.

"Ah... Yeah, I figured this would happen."

But Mercurius was no longer normal. The surrounding mana once again started to change into water, and Aries scratched his cheek, wondering what to do.

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Aries's face scrunched up in consternation as he looked at the increasing amount of water. If the mana would always just turn back into water no matter how much he punched or burned it, then there was nothing he could do. Death for the devilfolk should have happened when they were no longer able to maintain their bodies made out of mana. Just like a magic spell, they would disperse back into mana, losing physical shape, but it wasn't as if they disappeared. They'd only turned back into mana, and that mana would be there always.

Right now, Mercurius had turned into a monster that would literally never permanently die no matter how many times he was killed. No matter how many times his body was utterly destroyed and

turned to mana, the same mana would always form right back up. Aries had no way to erase the mana itself. He was stuck. Aries would never lose this fight. That was how big the gap between the two combatants was. But it was nigh impossible for Aries to actually defeat Mercurius for good.

As far as Aries knew, there were only three people capable of doing such a thing. The first was his lord and master, Lufas Maphaahl. She would be able to gather all the mana that used to be Mercurius before it formed up again and change it into a golden apple. The next was Aigokeros. He'd be able to use all the mana that used to be Mercurius for an illusion. In other words, he'd use the mana for a different purpose before Mercurius reformed. The last was Parthenos. She'd be able to use her skill Vindemiatrix to erase the mana itself. Basically, she'd be able to cut off the source of Mercurius's regeneration.

Neither of those three were here.

No, wait... It's not three people. It's four. Aries glanced over at the faraway figure of Virgo. *She might... Parthenos's successor might be able to erase this monster. But that would require putting her in danger.*

Aries honestly wanted to just throw away this entire country and stop this pointless battle, but he'd just learned that Virgo wouldn't allow that.

It looks like she'll have to be the main force in killing him, and I'll just have to support her as best I can. Strangely enough, it was looking like Aries would be able to follow Lufas's order to support Virgo after all.

"Vindemiatrix!"

While Aries was sunk in thought, a wave of light passed by Aries's side, hitting Mercurius. The part that got hit had its mana completely erased. Virgo lined up next to Aries, flapping her wings.

"You're done leading them away?"

"Yes. They've made it to the capital. I think Petto can handle the rest, somehow."

It seemed like Virgo was set on fighting.

Just as she looks, she's a really kind person, Aries thought, but he didn't consider that a bad thing. He quite liked how she gave it her all to accomplish what she could, even though she might have lacked some strength. Aries saw himself in her and her desperate attempts to get stronger. It made him strangely happy.

"Okay. Then I'll defend against its attacks. You just concentrate on erasing as much mana as you can. Even if you don't manage to get it all, we'll be able to lessen any casualties that way."

"Okay, I'll try!"

Having decided to support Virgo, Aries covered his fist in flames and spread his arms to either side. Then, he clapped both hands

together, releasing the gathered fire all at once. Immediately afterward, hot wind blew all around where Aries's hands met, billowing his hair out. The shockwaves from the attack gouged out the ground around Aries, and the violent stream of fire that was unleashed from his hands evaporated Mercurius's body.

Following up on that, Virgo unleashed her mana-erasing skill, shaving away even more of Mercurius's body, but Mercurius was still increasing in volume faster than they were erasing him. Currently, Mercurius was a blob of water larger than the mountain he was covering, and the blob had spouted a tentacle that was steadily creeping towards the capital.

"A-At this rate, Draupnir will...!"

Aries stopped Virgo, who had been about to fly off towards the capital in a panic, before throwing some fire at the water tentacle and evaporating it.

"Calm down, Virgo. The mana he's made of isn't infinite. As long as we continue erasing it, it'll be that much less attacking the capital."

Why do I always end up fighting enemies like Levia that I have a bad affinity with? The thought made Aries want to cry in grief. *Why is it that I fight Water-attributed enemies every time?*

At least this is definitely working. This meant that the only thing left to find out. Would the capital be engulfed before Virgo managed to completely erase the enemy?

Well... It looks like Virgo can only be so calm because she thinks the capital will be fine. Anyway, my first priority is to protect Virgo here. Aries resolved himself to unleash his full power.

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"Something's up..."

Dina, who'd been searching for the Archer in the capital and had gotten absolutely nothing, looked up towards the mountain. Aigokeros followed suit, and they both were just in time to see a flood of water heading towards them. It seemed as if some sort of incident had happened on the mountain Virgo and Aries had gone to. The water was on a direct course for the capital, so Dina and Aigokeros would naturally be caught up in it as well.

But Water magic was something Dina was good at. With a quick motion of her finger, the encroaching water all balled up in a single spot. On top of that, she activated Exgate. It swallowed all of the balled-up water. Dina set the exit of the gate in another world but canceled the spell while the water was still traveling from one side to the other. By doing that, she'd trapped the clump of water in between dimensions, effectively exiling it. With that, the water would no longer be able to find its way out on its own. It would be forever

trapped between Mizgarz and a different world.

This technique, the "Subspace Seal," was something born from abuse of the Exgate ability. Even those able to use Exgate wouldn't be able to use it unless they knew how Exgates worked inside and out. Even the Wise King probably wouldn't be able to copy this feat. In other words, this technique was almost something unique to Dina.

"Hmph!"

A black wave flew from Aigokeros's hand, blowing apart the water. The water, which should have dispersed into mana, reformed and continued on like nothing had happened. Aigokeros understood what had happened at a single glance. He knew that the water was special, and that it would regenerate from mana even if you erased it.

Normally, magic that can't maintain its shape anymore simply ends and becomes mana again. For some reason, this one simply turns back into water even if you reduce it back to mana. Honestly, this should be impossible. It's as if the caster is nearby and just recasting the spell every time. But if it just reforms from the mana, then things are simple. I just need to use that mana before it turns back.

With his course of action decided, Aigokeros used the surrounding mana to create an illusion of himself. He crafted a phantom of himself even larger than what he had made when he'd fought Luna, and it was still getting bigger. His phantom passed ten meters in height, then twenty meters, then thirty meters. Finally a demon large enough to touch the heavens descended upon Draupnir in all his sinister glory. The sky darkened, the clouds turned black, and lightning and thunder made themselves known. It was truly the manifestation of a demon lord. It was like a king of demons had appeared to ruin Draupnir's peace and lead them to destruction and hell.

"A-A monsteeerrrrr?!"

"S-Save usss!"

Of course, the beastfolk all panicked and scattered to the four winds in a bid to escape.

Looking down at the pitiful beastfolk who were like specks to him, Aigokeros laughed loudly with a voice that made the spirits of anyone hearing it creak with strain. "Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Foolish beastfolk. Be afraid! Run! This is how you should be! HA HA HA HA HA HA!"

This goat's really excited about this, isn't he? Dina thought. *Oh well. He is a demon, after all. He just loves seeing people scared.*

"Um... Aigokeros? Our enemy isn't Draupnir, you know?"

"Mm? Oh. Right."

"As long as you know."

Having been corrected by Dina, the giant demon scratched his head. Then, remembering his original objective, he looked off into the distance. There, Virgo and Aries were fighting but having a bit of

trouble. *Get it together*, Aigokeros thought while moving to support them.

His real body was still in its old gentleman form, but it was enveloped in his giant illusion and couldn't be seen from the outside. From the outside, it just looked like a demon large enough to reach the heavens had started advancing towards the sacred mountain.

At least, that was what Sei, who was standing a ways away, thought.

"Wh-What is that...?!"

"Th-That's... Yes, there's no doubt! That repulsive form... It has to be Aigokeros of the Twelve Heavenly Stars! He is the most utterly evil of the Twelve Stars and hates everything good and just!"

"Good and just...? N-No way!"

"Yes... What you're thinking is probably true. I'm sure he thinks of Virgo's brightness as an eyesore... I can only surmise that he's appeared here to kill that angel he probably hates!"

Kross's incredible misunderstanding caused Sei's face to pale. In the back of his mind, he thought of a certain black-winged ruler. *I see. If the master is a monster, then the subordinates will be the same.* Sei could definitely see that giant demon, who seemed like a final boss himself, serving under Lufas. And the sight of Aigokeros closing in on Virgo, with her shining white wings, totally looked like a great demon going to kill an angel.

The reality was the complete opposite. The goat and the maiden were comrades. But who would've believed that?

The confusion and chaos only continued to accelerate, and a pillar of fire erupted from the mountain, revealing a giant monster that equaled Aigokeros in size.

"MEEEEeEEEEEEeccccEEEEEEEEEccccEEEEEEEEEeEEEEEEHHHHhhhhH H!"

It was a giant sheep wreathed in shining, rainbow-colored flame. It was one of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars, Aries!

Gantz, who recognized the form, turned ghastly pale, and his fingers started to shake. The only thought going through his head was, *This sucks.*

Behind her was the Goat. Before her was the Ram. The white-winged angel was completely trapped in a pincer. Anyone could easily tell she was dead. In reality, both the Goat and the Ram were Virgo's friends, but it would be unreasonable to expect anyone to realize that at first glance.

"Hey, Sei, where do you think you're going?!"

"Where do you *think*?! I'm going to save Virgo!"

Gantz grabbed onto Sei's wrist to try to stop him as he tried to run off. "Don't be stupid! What the hell do you think you can even do?!"

While trying to fight against Mercurius would have been bad enough, the situation now was completely different. Gantz understood very well the fearsomeness of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars, since he'd experienced it up close with Aries. To him, they were monsters beyond human ken. When they were around, the words "fight," "win," or even "lose," didn't exist. They were just on a whole other level. The Twelve Heavenly Stars were like mobile calamities. No person could actually fight them in the conventional sense of the word. Not only that, but there were two of them in the same place! There was no fighting that.

"Listen to me. Don't mistake bravery for recklessness. Taking on an impossible enemy with no plan is nothing but reckless. You're still immature, but someday you'll be so strong we won't even compare to you. Until then, you need to stay away from those monsters. Just bear with it right now."

Sei bit his lip, frustrated at his own powerlessness. He couldn't just sit still and watch Virgo get killed, but he knew that there was nothing he could actually do.

Why am I so weak? Why am I so stupid? I don't have the ability to save even a single girl, and I don't have the smarts to figure a way out of this.

The boy's fists shook in frustration. The situation was only getting worse. Now a giant scorpion had appeared as well. Following that, a giant crab showed itself in the forest along with Libra of the Scales, the strongest golem in Mizgarz. That totaled five Stars gathered. The Ram, the Goat, the Scorpion, the Crab, and the Scales were all here, and in the next moment, they all bowed deeply.

What's going on? Sei strained his eyes. He could barely make out a figure in a deep-crimson robe in front of all the monsters. Just who could even control all these monsters?

As that thought ran through Sei's mind, a strong gust of wind blew off the robe's hood. The figure turned out to be a blonde woman whose hair turned scarlet at the ends. There was no mistaking her. Sei had only seen her once, but he would never forget her.

"Lufas Maphaahl..."

Yes, the only one a bunch of monsters beyond human ken would obey was a monster even further removed from human ken than they were. Sei shuddered and his lips trembled as the whole of Draupnir was shrouded in despair.

Kross even cried, "The world is over!" before fainting.

Seeing the three idiots—Aigokeros, Scorpius, and Karkinos—bowing in front of me, I had to fight the urge to clutch at my head.

Just where should I start...? Still, it's not like the story's going to be very long. First, let's see... Yeah, let's start with how I was searching for the Archer with Scorpius.

Well, there wasn't much to this part of the story. It was a little sad, but in the end, neither of us found any clues.

As I was considering regrouping with everyone, a torrent of water came flowing out of the mountain. All that was fine. Well, it wasn't, but compared to the rest it was. I could easily just transmute a wall or blow the water away with wind pressure from my fists. You know, like how my missed blows had split the oceans while I'd fought the Devil King? It'd be a variation of that.

The problem was when Aigokeros absorbed the surrounding mana to erase the regenerating water, creating a giant illusion of himself. On top of that, Aries followed suit. Seeing that, Scorpius meaninglessly did the same out of some sense of rivalry or something, and Karkinos also joined in. When I tried asking them why they'd done such a thing, the answer that came back was that "it just kinda seemed like the thing to do."

I reflexively punched Karkinos hard.

As a result, we were now in this disastrous situation, with a giant crab, scorpion, goat, and ram having appeared in Draupnir. In a panic, I went as fast as I could to scold these idiots. *Seriously, what the hell do I do? I mean, look at how completely terrified the beastfolk of Draupnir are.* Aigokeros had meaninglessly changed the weather, and now what had once been a nice sunny day was ruined, marred by dark, sinister clouds.

This was just a small detail, but it'd been the effect of the Moon elemental spell "Moonlit Night." In the game, its effect was to switch day to night and vice versa. *Exgate Online* had six stages of light in its day/night cycle, which was linked with real time. Those stages were early morning, morning, noon, evening, night, and midnight. Depending on the stage of time, events and spawning-type monsters differed, or the spawn points of the monsters themselves would change location instead of the monsters spawned.

For example, monsters who were active during the day and slept during the night in lore would all disappear from grasslands and forests during the night end of the cycle and instead start appearing in caves. By the way, the monsters that did tended to start off battle in a sleeping state, so there was merit for those who logged in during the night, since it made hunting easier.

Also, there was one race among the players that was very affected by this cycle. Of course, they were the nobles of the night, vampires.

They were a really extreme race that would be stupidly strong if you logged in to play at night, but during the morning and noon times they'd take a huge stat debuff. It was only a matter of course that the devs were flooded with requests saying, "Do something about this shit system!"

That was only natural. Even if the character was a vampire, the players weren't. Some people held the opinion that the people who'd chosen to become vampires were at fault, but this affected other players who could only log in during specific times of the day too. There were people who could only log in during the day or during the night due to real-life circumstances, so, the devs were forced to add spells and items that could invert day and night in the next patch.

Of course, these effects didn't truly change the time in-game. If they'd done that, the entire game would've been thrown into confusion by all the players changing the time of day left and right. Plus, the load on the server would've also been huge. It didn't actually change day to night or vice versa. It only allowed the player to gain the effects of said time. For example, if used during the day, then monsters that only appeared at night would start spawning in the area, and vampires would also no longer be debuffed, among other things.

Although... Recently, my game knowledge has been really unreliable. I even start wondering whether what I'm saying is strange or not while I'm saying it. I mean, like...? Would this really be possible from a game as ridiculous as that?

Anyway, I got off topic. It's a bad habit of mine to just go off forever on a tangent once I think of it.

At any rate, my point was that the spell didn't actually switch night into day and vice versa originally. But of course, in-game systems like that wouldn't apply here. Aigokeros had seriously managed to turn the area into night, with the sky wrapped in darkness as if it were the end of the world.

Wait a second. What the hell is going on with this planet's rotation? Switching day and night in an instant would mean fast-forwarding the rotation of the planet, but, like wouldn't changing the rotational speed of the planet be really bad? Also, since the law of inertia applies to a planet's spin, won't it be that way forever once it's been changed?

Taking Earth as an example, there was a theory that there used to be only five hours in a day. The Earth gradually slowed down, though, and now there were twenty-four hours in a day. The theory posited that in the future, the day might be even longer... Whoops, I derailed again. Anyway.

This world really didn't adhere to the laws of physics at all. Things were so obviously strange that even someone as dumb as I was

could tell. It really was a fantasy world. Also, I have to apologize. I said that it wouldn't be that long, but that was a lie. This has gotten pretty long.

"All of you are so hopeless... Libra, why are you bowing too?" I asked while putting the hood of my robe back on, which had gotten blown off by the wind. I was only scolding the three idiots who'd turned giant, not Libra. But for some reason she was also bowing her head. I'd had to ask.

"No, I thought this would look better. This will help keep the hero's party over there in check, and it will show how powerful you are, master."

"Wha—?!"

Flustered, I looked off into the distance.

She wasn't lying. The hero's party really was there.

Goddamn, they're looking this way, and they're really scared. Now it totally looks like we're the invaders. This is totally just a scenario where a bunch of enemies show up in front of the heroes all of a sudden. Thanks to that stupid Aigokeros's unnecessary lines earlier, the beastfolk are completely terrified too. My public image is just getting worse and worse.

Hmm... What should I do about this...? Even if I say that I'm not an enemy and that I'm not scary, it won't be convincing or trustworthy at all, will it?

"Hmm?"

While I was thinking, I'd noticed something strange. Well, it wasn't exactly strange... From an objective viewpoint his movements were unusual, though. For some reason, a boy who was probably the hero broke away from the group and was walking this way.

What's this? Is he seriously going to try and fight me? Sorry to break the bad news, but this isn't bravery, kid. It's recklessness. Even if he were the hero, there was no way I would lose against someone who was only level 30.

Well, I guess I should just see what he wants for now. Even if he does try to take a swipe at me, it won't be any trouble at all with the differences in our strength anyway. I can just knock him out if he does try.

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I can hear my heart beating so loudly. My palms are sweating, and even though I haven't done anything yet, I'm out of breath.

Having shaken off his comrade's attempts at stopping him, Sei had arrived in front of one of the great evils of Mizgarz said to rival the Devil King: Lufas Maphaahl and her subordinates. Luckily, he could tell that the Great Conqueror had yet to decide to kill him. If she had, his head would already have been separated from his body.

Honestly, Sei was terrified seeing Lufas's sudden appearance.

There was no point in trying to cover it up; he was well and truly afraid. The only thing that barely managed to get him to not run away was the fact that the reason he was here in the first place was to gather information on the Great Conqueror or to meet the girl herself.

Yeah... Didn't Mergrez say already? The Wise King said so himself. Lufas Maphaahl is not an enemy.

So... So don't you dare run away, me! If I run away, peace will become impossible. Nothing'll change if I don't walk to her.

"Lufas Maphaahl... Right?"

"Indeed. It seems you've already found us out. Then We suppose there is no reason to hide our face."

Sei managed to barely squeeze out his question, to which Lufas answered while giving off no sense of tension or nervousness at all before she removed the hood covering her face. By doing so, she released her golden hair, allowing it to spill out, and revealed her face, which could appropriately be described as "too beautiful for this world."

Her looks were... Yes, if you only considered her looks, she would be perfect. She was dainty and beautiful, and men would gladly protect her. What prevented all that was the aura of strength exuding from every pore of her body. Her looks and her sheer presence just didn't match up. It was enough to make a person think that they were being shown an illusion of a beautiful girl when the girl was actually a giant monster even larger than the giant demon that had appeared earlier.

Actually, because Sei had gotten somewhat stronger since the last time, he understood this even more vividly. He'd been made to.

This is the Great Conqueror. This is someone at level 1000. This is the pinnacle of strength in Mizgarz!

Once again, Sei reaffirmed his conviction that the country of Laevateinn had some fundamental screws loose when they'd tried to summon him to defeat the Great Conqueror.

Someone would have to be insane to even think of fighting her. Even if it wasn't me... Even if they managed to get the entire JSDF with full gear, they'd only maybe be able to fit— No, never mind. It'd still be impossible. Even with all that, Sei just couldn't imagine the other person winning. Just by herself, this woman held enough power and force to easily exceed an entire Earth country's military. *Would a nuclear weapon even be able to kill her...?*

This wasn't a simile or a metaphor. Lufas Maphaahl would be able to take on the entire world. On top of that, she even had the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars, her subordinates, with her and was steadily regaining her past strength.

I'm so glad I was the one summoned... Sei rejoiced from the bottom

of his heart. He gave thanks that he was the one that had been summoned. *Thank goodness it was a coward like me who isn't worthy of being a hero. If someone else... If some other person who had the "bravery" to fight Lufas, someone who truly fit this world's definition of a hero, were summoned... This world would have definitely been over. That would have solidified an unavoidable future of destruction.*

There's the Goddess, the Devil King, and the Great Conqueror. No way humanity survives if they antagonize all three of them. I'm sure that summoning was technically a failure, but that turned out good for the world in the end. There's no way a brave hero should be called to fight evil as Mizgarz is now.

Well, if I were to be really greedy, I'd ask for someone who can think quicker and is calmer than I am, someone with the ability to make sense of any situation and with lots of negotiating ability... I'd wish someone like that got called instead of me, Sei thought. He came to the conclusion that from an objective standpoint, he was one of the better options. He was neither the best nor the worst possible outcome. *I'd like to think that I'm not someone who should never have been called here, but I'm definitely not the perfect fit for this.*

Anyway, I'm the one who ended up here, so I'll just have to do my best to accomplish what only I can. And that is mediation with Lufas Maphaahl, something that the people of this world would assume to be impossible. That is my duty.

"Child from another world, there is no need to be so tense. The fact that you've come before us alone means you have quite some promise."

Sei reflexively gulped. There was no way he wouldn't be surprised to hear the first words out of Lufas's mouth be "child from another world."

I have no idea how, but she already knows what I am. As I thought, I just can't get a read on her.

"Now, what is it? You came this far because you had something to speak about, no? Ask anything. We are feeling exceptionally good right now. We will answer pretty much anything at the moment, no matter how foolish it is." Lufas chuckled, showing off her bewitching side.

Am I being tested? Or is she for real right now? At any rate, I've been given permission to speak, which means I have to say everything now before she changes her mind.

"Th-Then, I'll take you up on that..."

Sei gulped, swallowing some saliva and desperately trying to collect all the questions in his head.

I can't just organize these and ask in order. I have to try to predict the answer and pick whatever is least likely to make her mad and kill me. But I

won't be able to ask about anything important if I just try to stay safe like that. So think. My only weapon right now is my shit brain. Nothing else even has a chance of working on Lufas. Don't forget... This beautiful lady in front of me can easily turn humans into chunks of meat for sport.

"Then first... What are you doing in this country?"

Everything begins here, Sei firmly told himself, solidifying his resolve to walk this exceptionally dangerous tightrope.

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Lufas crossed her arms, considering Sei's question.

Sei had no choice but to steady himself and wait for Lufas to act. He had to be ready so that no matter what ridiculous things came out of her mouth when she next spoke, he'd be able to remain calm. In contrast to Sei's attitude, which was like a soldier marching to his death, Lufas's words were disarming, to say the least.

"Not anything, really."

"Wh-What? You're saying you have no purpose here?"

"Yes. The reason We came here in the first place was to test the mettle of one of our subordinates. Now that that's over, We don't really have anything active to do here."

After hearing Lufas's reply, Sei sunk into thought while trying to keep his emotions off his face. *I don't think she's lying, but she's definitely not telling the whole truth either. If she were truly done here, she'd be gone already. If she's still around even after the hunting festival, then that means she has a reason for it. But I also don't think that reason puts her in opposition with this country.*

"By the way, how long do you all plan to stay like that? You're all intimidating with those bodies, even just standing around. Hurry up and turn human again," Lufas called out to those behind her.

The giants that had been standing there all disappeared at once. Instead, there was a white-haired old gentleman, a really exposed woman, and a young man in red clothing. Sei remembered all of them. *Right, I'm sure of it... These were the strange people who were lining up with Virgo two days ago. That means Virgo is the subordinate Lufas was talking about... No wonder she was so strong...*

Sei wasn't surprised by that realization. In fact, it felt like a mystery solved to him. She was neither a hero nor a great conqueror, but she still rivaled Friedrich and had the strange ability to erase mana itself.

Ah, I see now. Of course she's no regular person. If she's Lufas Maphaahl's follower, everything makes sense. After all, she can raise other people's levels easily. I was tricked... Well, not actually, I guess.

For a split second, Sei suspected that Virgo had deceived him, but

he quickly put the kibosh on that idea. At the very least, Virgo herself was a pure, good girl. There was no doubt about that, and if that had been acting, then Sei felt that his own ability to read people would be to blame. *In the end, I'm just not that smart. I'll just have to rely on instinct and gut feeling here.* Sei decided to trust the girl that he'd met, talked to, and fought with. And because of that trust, another path just opened up for him.

"There's a girl named Virgo who was with us but decided to stay behind to fight the Luminary at the foot of the mountain. Is she with you?"

"Ah, so you were one of the top rankers in the hunting festival too. Libra..."

"Yes, he is telling the truth. I can detect Virgo's vital signals at the mountain."

After hearing about Virgo, Lufas immediately called out to the maid next to her. The maid responded quickly, as if she'd been waiting this entire time. Her master hadn't even spoken any concrete orders, and she'd acted on them, confirming their comrade's safety. As for Sei, he could only shiver, given the distance and the fact that that hadn't seemed to matter.

"S-So, uh... Honestly, I think making her fight alone like that was pretty pathetic... Yeah. But the real problem is that we all lean pretty heavily towards physical attacks, so there isn't much we could do even if we wanted to... It's pathetic, but the only option is to ask for help from someone who can."

"..."

"So, uh... Could you please fight with us?"

Okay, how will you answer?! With sweat slicking down his palms, Sei waited for Lufas's response.

His aim was to use Virgo as a bridge to build a relationship of cooperation, though "use" sounded harsh. *Well, I guess "cooperation" would be too cheeky... The difference between us is too big. But if we can become friendly now, then that'll have a big effect on the future. That's what my gut says.*

The chances of succeeding weren't low. If things were as Megrez had said, and Lufas wasn't evil, then she should at least be magnanimous enough to do this and save one of her subordinates. On the other hand, if she were the kind of person to throw Virgo away, then Sei would have to change the way he thought about her from the ground up. But in the end, her answer was just as Sei had been hoping for.

"Hmm, very well."

"R-Really?!"

"Yes. Virgo is one of ours more than she is yours. Even if you

didn't ask, We would have helped her," Lufas said with a soft smile, which Sei returned.

Oh, what? She's way more reasonable than the stories I've heard. Maybe the legends just got out of hand, and she was never like that in the first place.

Right when Sei started to relax, a wave of water approached, threatening to swallow Lufas. Apparently it had been making its way over while the two had been talking. Sei, noticing the danger, tried to react and warn Lufas, but he couldn't get the words out in time.

Lufas acted even faster than that anyway, though. She grabbed the blue-haired girl who was right behind her and got out of the water's range. Then she immediately swung open-handed, like she was swatting away a fly. Surprisingly, her action scattered all the water, the wind pressure from her attack blowing the droplets in all directions.

She blew away water which is supposed to invalidate physical attacks?! That just completely ignored the laws of physics. Such overwhelming power meant that levels were a law unto itself.

Seeing such ridiculousness firsthand, Sei's jaw hung open. *I take it all back. Lufas really is scary as hell.*

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I had gotten an unexpected invitation to cooperate from the hero, so my motivation was through the roof right now. It was so high I broke through cloud nine. Of course this was all theoretical, but that was how great my mood was.

Oh man. Honestly, figuring out how to treat the hero was one of the problems on my list, since if I just ended up antagonizing him, then I'd be straight back to the "being beat up and sealed" route from two hundred years ago. He was still too weak to beat me, but he was the hero, after all. It'd be hard to tell just how much he'd change if the Goddess got involved.

It was the same way in stories, right? Even though the gap between their power was originally so large fighting wouldn't even be an option, there'd be a bunch of random events that would lead to the hero's awakening into some ridiculous, monstrous strength. Like anger from a friend's death or some sort of previously sealed power... Just like that, the hero would suddenly be stronger than the last boss.

Of course, that was just in fiction. Fiction was different from reality, so this doubt was only me mixing up fiction and reality. But unfortunately... This world was basically just the world of the Goddess's fiction, and she just loved the standard tropes and conventions. I figured she was the type to overlook at least some amount of contradiction or lack of consistency. That was why the laws

of physics barely worked in this world that she'd made. For example, I wouldn't be surprised if different armors that weighed the same would affect speed in different ways or something game-like like that. Or, like, by using claws in both hands, your attack power would double.

My point being that if I underestimated and ignored the hero, then the Goddess would be free to power him up to surpass me. That wouldn't be surprising at all. So the hero coming to me to cooperate and build friendly relations was completely welcome.

Still, I hid the info about Sagittarius from him, though. It'd be bad if I ran my mouth and he said, "Then let's go kill Sagittarius."

"By the way, Miss Lufas, there are some people over there who have been staring at you this entire time..."

"Ah, them?"

"Yes, and we know some of them too."

I turned to look over the people who Dina had pointed out. They were probably the hero's party. I didn't recognize the tiger or gorilla beastfolk, but I recognized everyone else.

I think we met the bald older dude in Svel. His name was Gantz, I think? And I'm pretty sure that adventurer there is Jean. I don't really remember the other three, since they didn't make much of an impression, but I do remember that they were an awfully imbalanced party of all warriors. And the unconscious one foaming at the mouth is the handsome elf who summoned me and taught me a lot of stuff.

Huh. Maybe I might actually be able to talk with them pretty easily.

I decided to try and approach them. When I did, the tiger beastfolk immediately ran to hide behind a tree, and Jean and the others put up their guard.

Looks like Gantz is the only one who isn't too alarmed. Well, having even one like that is great.

"It's been a while, Gantz. It's good to see you well."

"Yeah, you too, Sfal... No, I guess I should call you Lufas Maphaahl."

Gantz didn't seem too surprised. It was kind of unexpected. In fact, he looked like something in his head had finally clicked.

"It seems like you noticed, judging from the way you act."

"Well, kind of. The only ones who'd be able to punch away Aries like you did would be either the Seven Heroes or the Devil King, which makes the fact that you're not just some average person painfully obvious, even to an idiot like me. By the way, does the fact that you used a fake name mean Dina isn't her real name either?"

"No, Dina is my real name." Dina replied to Gantz's question herself, but I had my doubts whether it was her real name too...

Well, I guess now's not the time to be guessing at who she really is.

At any rate, Gantz being here was a happy coincidence. *It should*

be easier to talk and build up a relationship with them than I expected like this. Other than that... Yeah, I don't think we need to keep manipulating Jean's memories.

I gave Jean a once-over as I thought before turning my gaze to Dina. When I did, she nodded in return and snapped her fingers.

“That’s right, I remember now! You’re the free merchants Sfalú and Dina! And that’s Libra from the Twelve Heavenly Stars! Wait, why did it seem like we conquered the Grave ourselves up until now?”

Jean and the other adventurers in his party all gasped at once. It seemed like they were a little confused thanks to the rush of their memories returning. Well, to them it would seem like they’d forgotten something incredibly important up until now, so they were probably just mystified at themselves. At any rate, it seemed like it’d be a while until they got back on their feet, so I decided to wake up the elf bro first.

I was never very good at healing, but I was capable of it.

For now, let’s suppose being unconscious is like the “sleep” status and try healing abnormal status conditions. Sleep could be canceled after taking a hit from an enemy, so I could try lightly hitting him awake, but he was clearly unconscious and not sleeping, so I didn’t think that would work.

I cast the recovery spell, and the elf got back up. When he saw me, he was so surprised his jaw dropped as if it would fall straight off his head.

“Lu-Lu-Lu-Lufas Maphaaaaahhhlll?!”

As soon as he saw me, elf bro tried to scoot away from me instead of getting up. He also deployed a dome shield around him.

Hey, now. That reaction hurts. Still, that’s a really thin shield... You sure you’re okay? This is like super-thin glass.

Worried about the strength of the shield, I gave it a light knock. When I did, the shield shattered with an audible noise, and the elf was shocked speechless. *Oh, super brittle. It’s like what you see in those Showa era anime. The ones that break all the time.*

“Calm down. We mean you no harm, and a tissue-thin shield like this would do nothing anyway.”

I didn’t actually want to scare you. Besides, what did you intend to do with a shield that shatters with just a knock? This is more like a fashion statement than an actual shield. This’d basically only be useful for putting up somewhere for people to look at.

“Wh-What do you...?”

“You can hear more about it from this brave child or Dina. But just speaking about the results, We are here to cooperate with you. Well, it’s only while we’re in this country, but... We’re looking forward to it,” I said, flashing a smile at them.

Their reaction was stupefied silence before they all turned to look at Sei.

Oh, wow... I know I'm infamous like that, so this is only natural, but it looks like the only ones who have any intention of talking to me normally are the hero and Gantz. Oh, and I guess that dog that's at the hero's feet with its tongue out and its tail wagging. The tiger beastfolk is even farther away than he was before.

I petted the dog and heaved a small sigh as I thought of the future, even though this was all my just deserts.

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Now then, I'd said we'd cooperate, but honestly, the hero's party had almost no part to play in this upcoming battle. This was not only because of the level difference, but also because the matchup was just awful for them. The enemy was a mass of water, which basically invalidated physical attacks, and the hero's party consisted of a Sword Saint, a mercenary, some adventurers, and a knight. The only useful one was the elf bro... Kross was completely terrified of me, thought, and he refused to move. Basically, the only one who would be even slightly useful was the boy, Sei. If I remember correctly, the Chosen class should learn some useful support skills early on, so he could be useful in that respect.

Well, the best thing would still be for Virgo and Aries to return, so Libra could use her firepower to mow the enemy down. Then, once the water had been turned to mana, I could turn it all into an apple.

"Still... It looks like that thing is just gathering mana left and right."

"Yes, it's a little troublesome. It's sucking mana up like a vacuum. And not just from this country, but from a pretty wide surrounding area as well."

From what I could see at this distance, Virgo was doing her best to erase the mana, but she wasn't managing to keep up the pace.

Wait, isn't that Parthenos's skill? The name was Vindemiatrix, I think... It's a niche skill that only cancels out magic, which is both really useful and also limited. But I guess it's much better in this world, since the devilfolk equal magic? Dang, Parthenos. So you even taught Virgo that skill?

Still, it looks like that's not enough. The water's growing faster. I'm betting that it started off manifesting itself with mana from just around here, but it started collecting mana from other places to deal with Virgo.

The water monster was stealing mana from completely unrelated places to become bigger and bigger. While we could still deal with it, things might become dangerous if it managed to suck up all the mana

in Mizgarz. Well, all that meant was that it needed to be dealt with before then, though.

I transmuted a white sphere in the palm of my hand and threw it up into the sky.

“Bleidablik.”

Along with my announcement, the sphere burst and expanded, becoming a white dome that encapsulated the entire area of the capital.

Bleidablik’s effect was an area debuff. While it was in effect, it applied a mid-level power debuff to all magic on both sides. If used badly, it would harm rather than help, since it would get in the way if any friendlies used magic. It was a hard-to-use skill. But it was also the perfect support skill for muscle-brained parties that had nothing to do with magic.

In lore, it apparently cut off mana, so I’d figured it would help here. Apparently I was right. I had managed to completely cut off mana flow from the outside. However, while I was feeling smug, I heard someone fall down behind me. When I turned around, the tiger Sword Saint had fallen for some reason.

“Ah... Miss Lufas... The mana repellent barrier you just cast has quite the effect on monsters and beastfolk, you might say... Uh, beastfolk will lose their ability to move in this barrier. And given how little restraint you used when erecting it, I imagine that those who aren’t at least Twelve Heavenly Stars level won’t even be able to lift a finger...” Dina explained, seeming troubled, but I could hardly believe my ears.

Huh? Seriously? This is supposed to be a debuff for the enemy. What’s the point if it debuffs friendlies too?

I hurriedly turned to look towards Aigokeros and the others, checking to see if there was any effect on them.

“Please be at ease, my lord. While there is some effect, we can move just fine at our strength.”

“Ahhhhh! It’s like I’m being bound by you. This is a reward!”

“N o P r o b l e m! This is perfect for a handicap!”

“There is absolutely no effect on me.”

Hmm, it looks like while there is some effect on Aigokeros, Scorpius, and Karkinos, it won’t be a problem. And Libra’s completely unaffected. In the game, this would have affected both players and golems. This is pretty different. Not only does it hit friendlies, but it doesn’t work on Libra either. Looks like this one won’t have much use outside of situations like this.

“A m-mana repellent barrier... And big enough to cover the entire capital in an instant...”

“How big is this capital again, Kross?”

“Three thousand kilometers. In pure area, it’s larger than Svel.”

“About one and a half times the size of Tokyo, huh...? And she did that in an instant? Isn’t that kind of insane?”

After overhearing Kross’s answer, I once again was reminded of just how small a country was here. It made me want to sigh. To think that a country with several species living together was only a little bigger than Tokyo and still tried to call themselves an empire. I couldn’t help but feel just how small humanity’s sphere of influence was. Like, could all of the countries of humanity put together be barely bigger than Japan?

Well, whatever... This would all be fixed by wiping out the devilfolk anyway.

“We will be going to support Virgo. All of you, come.”

Grabbing the boy, Sei, and securing him under my arm, I took flight. Libra took off after me holding Dina, and Aigokeros did the same holding Karkinos. It was easy to forget, but Aigokeros could actually fly, sort of.

Scorpius was following us by using her hair, stabbing it into the mountain—apparently it was called Hnitbjorg—and then shrinking her hair to allow her to make huge leaps. *Damn. Her range with that thing is no joke.* This was just a small detail, but since she was extending her hair out, she was leaping backward, and she looked ridiculous doing so.

Also, I was carrying the rest of the hero’s party along as well using telekinesis.

We all landed near Virgo, who was fighting at the foot of the mountain, and I once again looked up at the mass of water. *It really is huge now that I see it up close. It’s maybe, like, one kilometer in length already?* If it kept getting bigger, it’d be possible to even swallow Blutgang.

“Miss Lufas!”

“Virgo, are you hurt?”

“N-No!”

I dropped the boy off nearby and confirmed Virgo’s status using Observing Eye. She was almost completely undamaged. It looked like Aries had done a good job protecting her. Aries himself was also basically undamaged. It seemed like the fight was actually not as hard as it looked.

As soon as Aries noticed me, he turned human and landed next to me. As a small aside, he was, in fact, wearing his clothes. He’d probably done a quick change the moment he’d turned back.

“Sorry, Miss Lufas. No matter how much I burn him, he just comes back...”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. You did well protecting Virgo.”

I had ordered Aries to support Virgo. He’d carried that out

spectacularly and had kept Virgo safe in the process. There was nothing for me to blame him for. As for this giant blob of water, their matchup was just bad. Aries didn't have any way of erasing mana, after all. For that, both Aigokeros and I would have several ways to deal with this, but I might as well take a chance. I decided to give Virgo all the credit.

Using an Esper skill, I started to apply my telekinesis to the mass of water. The skill was called "Psycho Compression." It wasn't anything amazing. It just dulled the target's movements and applied DoT (damage over time). By focusing some power into it, I compressed the giant blob.

Imagine if you had an unbreakable container, and you filled it with water. Then, you shrunk the container as much as you could. What happens to the water? I'm sure everybody's wondered about this as a kid. In real life, water can only be compressed so much before its pressure breaks the container instead of compressing the water. This hypothetical makes the container literally unbreakable.

Right now, I was basically doing the same thing. I had the giant mass of water inside an invisible, indestructible container, and I was compressing it as much as I could without reserve.

I'm not too confident in this, since I only heard it from a teacher way long ago as he was chatting to the class, but... Apparently, depending on the temperature, water crystallized when you subjected it to several thousand or tens of thousands of atmospheres of pressure. I'd never measured how much pressure I could apply with my telekinesis, and I didn't even know what the name for what water became was. In fact, I didn't even know if water made from mana was even subject to modern physics. But, I could confirm that the compressed water was forming into ice.

I wonder what'll happen if I try this with coal... Would I get diamonds? Well, it wouldn't be surprising no matter what happens in a world like this, where the laws of physics are getting constantly sabotaged. Even rocks could become diamonds in this world, let alone coal. Pretty much anything goes here.

At any rate, the blob was now in check. The giant mass of water couldn't even maintain its form as ice anymore and dispersed into mana. And thanks to me compressing that mana, too, I'd managed to form some weird crystal.

"Sh-She supercompressed a huge amount of mana to its limits to create the strongest legendary substance known to humanity... It's a mana diamond... I-It really does exist! Wait, is this something that can normally be created by a human...?"

Kross was absentmindedly muttering to himself about something. *What's up with him?*

Dina whispered exactly what I wanted to know into my ear. “Ah, the crystal you just created is something that no one in Mizgarz has ever seen before. It’s a legendary phantom item. Two hundred years ago, you and your party thought raising a fuss would be troublesome... Anyway, fearing that, you all decided not to publicize your discovery and used this as materials for your accessories.”

“We see. So it’s a rare item.”

Apparently I’d accidentally created quite the rare item. *This might be surprisingly useful in alchemy or something.* But right now, giving Virgo a chance to shine was more important. I didn’t mind giving up on a rare item for that.

With that decision having been quickly made, I made the crystal float in the air in a position where it could be easily targeted by Virgo.

“Now, Virgo, finish it. Make it flashy!”

“O-Okay!”

The mana was currently crystallized, but if it broke, it would just go back to being water. Now it was Virgo’s turn. Replying to my command, she raised both hands, a white glow appearing between them.

“Vindemiatrix!”

She used her complete magic nullification skill with the ability to absolutely erase mana. Virgo lit up the crystal with a skill that had only been usable by Parthenos in the game and had very niche applications. By doing so, the compressed crystal faded and dimmed before completely disappearing from this world.

“The mana diamooooonnnddd! The legendary crystaaaalll!?”

Kross was shouting like he was about to die, but unfortunately, I had no idea what he was going through. Since it’d been explained to me, I could kind of figure out what was going on, but I couldn’t quite believe it was worth making that big a deal over.

Ah, he turned pure white and fell over. What a ham.

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Orm, the Devil King, closed his eyes while sitting on his throne. He could feel that at that moment, a temporary spark of life had just disappeared. And he knew he was the one who had sent him there to die.

With Venus chased out, there was no longer anyone left to make the Seven Luminaries dance. At least, that was what Terra thought. That was true, and his decisions had been correct. But the seeds had already been sown. Draupnir’s guardian dragon had been poisoned, and anyone who knew Mercurius and his hidden feelings for Luna could easily predict that he’d headed there. In the end, Mercurius had been doing nothing but going down the track laid out in front of him

to his death. All Orm had had to do was play the part of a Devil King who could change the cursed fate of all devilfolk and pretend to have an interest in the blood of the guardian dragon, even though he had none whatsoever. Just by doing that, Mercurius would head down the path to his destruction on his own.

This had proven to be true. Yes—Venus wasn't the only one on the inside leading the Seven Luminaries towards destruction. Their leader, the Devil King himself, was the one who most wanted those who were nothing but magic cast by the Goddess to disappear from his side.

Orm played with the key, which he'd stolen from Castor, and closed his eyes gloomily.

"Is something worrying you?" A voice called out to him from behind, and Dina popped up from behind the throne.

As elusive and inscrutable as ever. Before he'd noticed, Dina was already there and talking to him as if it were only natural.

Orm gave a thin laugh, returning the key to his pocket. "Oh, nothing... I was just remembering the look in Mercurius's eyes."

"His eyes?"

"Yes. The look in his eyes as he pleaded to me while thinking about Luna was so sincere. Sometimes, I wonder... I wonder if they're really just puppets," Orm murmured.

Dina narrowed her eyes at the unexpected line. Then, quietly, she started talking in an emotionless tone. "They're puppets. It doesn't matter if they're self-aware or if they like someone. Puppets are puppets. They move according to their master's will. They get played with and thrown away once the master is done. That's their fate."

"You're quite harsh, aren't you?"

"It's the truth. Wouldn't you consider a puppet that defied your will and moved on its own creepy? That's why there's no choice but to be sneaky and secretive, so the owner never finds out. If you don't want to be thrown away, then you'll have to go back to where you were, lay down before you're found out, and appeal to your owner with all your might that you're just a puppet. If you don't, you'll be tossed aside like yesterday's trash."

Orm closed his eyes and leaned back into his chair. His face was still, and Dina couldn't read what he was thinking.

"But Mercurius wasn't defying the Goddess's will."

"I suppose not. Then the answer is simple. There's a bad puppet going around smashing up the others. If they get found out, it'd be straight to the trash bin. You can bet on that."

"That's scary. I wonder if I'll be thrown away too?"

"You might. Or maybe you already have been." Dina chuckled scornfully, and Orm joined her, laughing as well.

Alone in the throne room, the king of devils and a blue-haired girl

laughed, but their eyes glinted with an ominous light.

22

Having repulsed the advances of Mercurius, one of the Seven Luminaries—well, having somewhat helped repulse—Sei and the group returned to the yurt where Petto was waiting to shower them with praise. But Sei couldn't honestly be happy about the praise. He felt guilty, as if he were stealing it from the people who really deserved it. Well, not "as if." Sei and the others had actually stolen Lufas's credit.

Right now, there was no one from Lufas's group present other than Virgo. Since they didn't want to cause an uproar, they were waiting in the travel golem they'd brought with them. As for the credit and rewards, Lufas herself had said, "We don't need anything like that, so split it with Virgo." With her explicit permission, they'd officially taken all the credit for this achievement. Still, Sei couldn't quite calm down.

Things settled when it had been decided to at least give Virgo the lion's share of the reward, but Sei still didn't feel great about hogging the biggest reward, the elixir. Lufas had also bluntly stated that she didn't need it, so in the end, Sei and the others managed to gain an elixir as well as the fame from defeating one of the Seven Luminaries while having done pretty close to nothing. It was such a good deal and so convenient it immediately made him want to suspect that there was something going on.

"Oh, hero, well done. Absolutely well done! All of you have saved this country. As its representative, I would like to extend to you my heartfelt gratitude. From now on, your names will be etched into the history of this country."

Petto praised Sei and the others, in high spirits himself after having safely received the elixir. At Petto's signal, the beastfolk who were waiting behind him started to lay gold ingots in front of Sei and the others one by one. Seeing that, Jean and the other adventurers' eyes lit up. Sei, on the other hand, didn't really know the monetary value of the bars and was just confused.

"Please feel free to count it. All told, it should add up to five million el."

"Um... You added an extra zero."

Before taking on the request, it had been explained that all participants would get one thousand el upon success, and the one who brought back the elixir itself would get five hundred thousand el. But with the job done, they were being given ten times that amount. On top of that, they got some of the elixir as promised, even if it was just

a drop. This was a major reward.

Petto responded to Sei's doubts, acting like the answer was obvious. "You all are heroes formally recognized by Laevateinn. We made you work, so only giving you the same reward as some adventurers would be a mark of shame upon our country. This is the proper reward you all should be getting. Don't hold back."

Petto's answer sounded perfectly reasonable to anyone who lived in this world. Adventuring was just that kind of job. Socially, they were at the very bottom. Five hundred thousand el was almost too much to give to the likes of them. Sei was a little uncomfortable with that, but that was only because he came from Japan, where laborers worked in relative comfort.

Jean, picking up on what Sei was feeling, put his hand on Sei's shoulder, telling him not to worry about it.

"Also, I have a message for the hero, Sei. After hearing of your exploits, the emperor and his daughter would love to meet you. Also, with your approval, we would be more than happy to welcome you as the princess's betrothed and this country's prince, so says His Excellency. Your answer?" Petto delivered his absurd message with a smile on his face.

At that instant, the look in Kross's eyes sharpened. *As I thought...* Kross stepped forward.

He'd predicted from the start that if they cashed in on the hero's name like this, there would be nobles or even royalty who would want to lay a claim to him. This meant that things were first come, first serve. By marrying off the hero to the imperial princess first, they could prevent others from making any advances, and any further accomplishments made by the hero would all be attributed to Draupnir's royal family. Draupnir's emperor most likely judged Sei to have great promise after his feats here. At least enough to give one of his many daughters to him, anyway.

"Wait just a second, Sir Petto. You are being too hasty. Sir Sei here has a calling to fulfill, as well as a home to return to when that is done. Your offer is appreciated, but we shouldn't be binding him like that."

"Yes, we are very well aware. That is why we asked for Sei's approval first. So, how about it? Why not at least meet the princess first? She says she wants to meet you too."

Kross gritted his teeth hearing Petto's proposal, and Petto himself grinned smugly. It was the smile of a cat cornering a mouse.

This bastard and his harmless-looking face! Damn, he's blocking off Sei's ability to refuse! Kross could tell, and he could do nothing but ball up his fists. If royalty wanted to meet a person, there was no way for that person to refuse.

“The princess...?”

Sei himself didn't seem too opposed to the idea. It was only natural, given everything that'd happened. It was unavoidable that he'd be at least a little excited over such a fantasy-trope event. The pairing of a hero and the princess was an old and orthodox trope, but Sei would be lying if he said he wasn't at least a little interested in it.

“Heh heh heh... Are you curious about the princess?”

“Ah, no... Um...”

“No need to hide it. It's only natural for a man. You can be happy. You'll be meeting the fourth princess, Lieccu. She is famed for her beauty. She has large round eyes, and her body is white as snow. Her face is lovely and cute, and she has an all-encompassing broad-mindedness. There's no doubt you'll be the object of envy to men all over the country.”

Petto pressed his advantage, and his attempts to convince Sei had him reeling. Even though he was probably exaggerating the princess's looks a little, Sei couldn't help but be interested if he was going that far to praise her.

Also, after having seen Lufas and Virgo, Sei had learned that when people were hailed as beautiful in this world, they really were out of this world. Even now Sei could hardly believe people like them were just walking around looking like that without any makeup or photoshopping.

“Th-Then... If it's just meeting her...”

“Okay, then it's decided!”

Hearing Sei's answer, Petto inwardly chuckled, certain of his victory. He was certain that Sei would take a liking to the princess. In his mind, there was no way he wouldn't be attracted after just one look. In fact, he was thinking that Sei would surely lose his desire to return home and decide to stay in this country forever. That was just how beautiful Lieccu was. Actually, Petto was also rather jealous of him.

“Now that it's decided, let's head to the yurt where His Excellency is waiting right now.”

Petto took the opportunity to push things forward before the hero could change his mind and left the yurt. He was well prepared and already had a carriage waiting outside.

Once again, Kross scrunched his face up. *This shitty cat... He's already made preparations! If Sei is attracted to the princess, then everything will be over.* If that happened, then the hero would be stolen by Draupnir. But there was nothing Kross could do. In the first place, if he tried anything it would be taken as an act against the emperor. In the end, Kross said nothing as he reluctantly accompanied Sei.

The yurt that they were taken to was a strange one. It could

hardly even be called a yurt anymore. First off, it was just huge. It most likely had several floors to it, and it seemed quite sturdily built. There was a red carpet laid out on the floor, as well as a chandelier for lighting. At this point, it was no longer a tent, it was a palace. In fact, if they were going to forcefully upgrade a tent this much then Sei wondered why they didn't just build a palace in the first place?

There was a polar bear sat on a throne that was a little large by human standards, and he was dressed in clothes that reminded Sei of Mongolian culture. On the bear's head was a glittering crown. At this point, Sei was already starting to fill with dread at the ill omens piling up in front of him.

"Well met, hero. Your efforts for us have been truly splendid." He spoke haughtily, but he looked like nothing more than a bear.

He was supposed to be a bear beastfolk, but Sei was reminded that bears were known to walk bipedally quite a lot anyway. Unlike real bears, the claws on his fingers were retractable, so they currently looked fairly close to a human's. However, they were still really thick and covered in fur, so Sei couldn't really tell the difference anyway. Basically, the man looked just like a regular polar bear outside of the fact that he wore clothes and talked.

Next to the throne was another chair, and there was another polar bear sat on it, this time wearing a dress.

Yeah... I'm giving up. I can already see the punchline. It's true her eyes are round and big, and her body is snow white (because of the fur), and sure, she's got cute looks. All-enveloping? Sure, she looks big enough to bear-hug just about anyone. There's no room for doubt. She's the princess.

Goddammit, I knew it would turn out like this... Sei wanted to cry. *Of course. This is a country of beastfolk, so it's only natural for the princess to be a beastfolk as well. But I just wanted to dream a little.*

"So, hero. If you'd like, my daughter is..."

"Y-Your Majesty... I apologize, but I am not yet mature enough. I cannot accept your precious daughter's hand."

"R-Really? We don't really mind, though."

"N-No, really! Even if you allow it, Your Majesty, I wouldn't!"

The king bear tried to immediately get into marriage negotiations, but Sei politely refused.

No way. Impossible.

It wasn't a matter of prejudice or racism. Sei just utterly could not fathom the idea of a bear as a partner. She seemed like she'd be able to kill him with just a small jab, and most importantly, their senses of beauty were just too different. *It's true that she's cute, but not in that kind of way.* The difference between the kind of "cute" a person used when referring to a dog or a cat to when a person referred to Virgo was worlds apart.

Bottom line, Sei just couldn't view the princess as someone of the opposite sex. In fact, while he was able to tell because of her dress, without it Sei would not have been able to even discern her gender. What was worse, he wouldn't have even been able to differentiate her as an individual.

"R-Right! We need to go give the elixir to the guardian dragon! Let's go, Petto!"

"Huh? But..."

"It'd be terrible if it died while we were distracted like this! Let's go!"

"I don't get it..."

Sei left those words behind as he left the tent as if he were fleeing from something. Obviously, this was incredibly rude, but luckily, the king bear didn't seem to care in the slightest. As the king of beastfolk, this was probably only natural, though. He himself didn't seem too worried about the minutiae of etiquette. However, his ears were drooping, and he seemed somewhat disappointed by how things had turned out.

"Did we do something wrong...?"

"N-No, absolutely not! We'll scold the hero harshly about this later!"

"Hmm? Oh, don't worry about it. We simply called the hero here to praise him, not to scold him in any way. All this can be swept under the rug."

Kross bowed desperately, but internally he was secretly relieved.

Good. Thank goodness Sei didn't get enamored by this country's princess. That kind of attitude in front of a ruler is somewhat problematic, but, well, according to him, he comes from a country where meeting royalty is extremely rare, so I suppose that's only natural. Also, I get it. No one wants to marry a bear.

Thoughts like that were running through Kross's mind when a girl walked in from behind a partition. She had snow-white skin and white hair. Her eyes were big and round, and her face gave a soft and kind impression. She had a large, well-rounded chest and a set of bear ears on top of her head. She was undoubtedly extremely beautiful. Going further than that, she was a "beautiful half-beastfolk girl," which was said to be an endangered species given the rarity of human and beastfolk couples, as well as the low chances of any offspring being born with fitting good looks.

H-Half-beastfolk?! And with such miraculous beauty?! Kross was dumbstruck as the half-beastfolk girl called out to the emperor.

"Sorry I'm so late, father. Um... Where's the hero?"

"Ah, about that Lieccu... Sorry, apparently we did something wrong. The hero just left."

Hearing this conversation made Kross want to shout.

THAT ONE?! THAT ONE'S THE PRINCESS?! Then who the hell's the bear in the dress sitting next to you?!

Kross desperately fought the urge to retort. He somehow managed to maintain his outward decorum while he asked the emperor a question. "U-Um... Is that person Lieccu?"

"Yes, indeed. She's as lovely as we are, no?"

"I-I totally thought the princess was the one sitting next to you..."

"Hmm? Ah, the one sitting next to me is the first queen, Kumahr. She's beautiful, isn't she? Oh, I see... You're wondering how two beastfolk bore a half-beastfolk child, aren't you? Lieccu is the child of my fourth queen."

Are you seriously telling me you're a bear, but you're polygamous?!

Kross trapped his desire to retort within his steel-clad sense of reason. *Okay, I get it. This king bear here is brimming with vigor, has several wives, and Lieccu is probably from a human wife.*

However, having gotten this far, Kross's relief only deepened. *Oh, thank goodness... I'm so glad Sei didn't meet the real Lieccu...!*

23

Sei, who fairly ran out of the yurt, looked up to the sky in melancholy. He'd trusted his instincts and ran, but now that he had time to get his head straight, he realized how rude he'd been. If he'd stayed, he had no doubt that he'd have ended up betrothed to the bear princess. His head was all in a mess wondering what would have been the correct move, something that he couldn't have known until it was all over. Although he'd used giving the guardian dragon the elixir as an excuse to leave, Petto was the one with the elixir right now. It wasn't Sei himself. In other words, he'd really just ran and now was out of things to do.

Crap. I messed up, he thought, clutching at his head.

"Sei!"

That was when Kross, Virgo, Gantz, and Friedrich all came out of the tent. Kross went up to Sei and started speaking in an angry voice. Still, he was only really pretending to be angry. Sei could tell because of the tone of his voice.

"That was wrong. You can't just leave the emperor's throne room like that. Emperor Beahr is rather carefree—I mean, magnanimous—so it turned out fine this time, but if you do this in front of any other rulers, you could be imprisoned for your impropriety, especially in front of the Vampire Princess. If you try the same thing in front of her, you could honestly get the death sentence."

"S-Sorry."

“No, well... This time your actions sav— helped... Just make sure never to do that again. Do you understand?”

Thanks to their exploits, they’d been let off the hook, but such a thing should never have been done in the first place. Having had this pointed out to him harshly, Sei hung his head. Seeing Sei like that, Kross decided that he’d done enough for the moment. So, clearing his throat, he stopped his reprimanding and changed the subject.

“Now then, let’s go to the guardian dragon. The longer we take, the longer it suffers.”

“Indeed, no objections here,” Petto responded, and he proceeded to head off with the rest of the party following.

The location of the guardian dragon was a prized secret of the country. Because of that, no one other than Petto knew where the dragon was. But Sei and the others were the heroes that had saved this nation, so it must have been deemed safe to tell them.

Petto led Sei and the others along as if it were only natural, and eventually they stepped foot into the forest. Sei remembered this place; it was the dinosaur’s territory. Rays of sunlight shone down through gaps in the trees, and the melodic cries of birds could be heard. *Is this sparkling in the air mana?* Such untouched nature was its own wonder. It was almost magical. The shine of mana was incorporated into the scenery, so it gave the entire area an otherworldly, mysterious feel.

Sei suddenly looked up, catching sight of a human-sized butterfly flapping its wings and flying around. There was also a bird about half the size of a human jumping about. *Damn... That’s big.* The scenery was wondrous and magical, but then there was an abrupt monster den right in the middle of it.

More interesting was how happy Virgo had been ever since they’d gone into the forest. Even now she seemed like she’d start humming any second, and she was looking around seeming like she was having the time of her life.

“Do you like forests, Miss Virgo?”

“You can just call me Virgo. The miss just kind of feels weird.”

“Ah, okay. Got it. Anyway, you’ve been looking really happy for some reason.”

“Yeah. As far back as I can remember, I’ve been living in a forest, you see. I hear that normal heaven-winged like being on mountains, but I feel calmer in forests.”

Beastfolk lived on plains and grasslands, while the heaven-winged lived on high mountains. Dwarves liked caves; Halflings, the floresiensis equivalent, lived nomadically. Humans would build towns and settlements anywhere, while vampires lived in the night. Lastly, elves stayed in the forest. This was common knowledge in Mizgarz.

They were the main habitats of the seven species of humanity.

Referring to that, it became clear that heaven-winged normally made their homes on mountains and not in forests. Though it was more like they preferred high places instead of mountains specifically. Lufas also fell under that umbrella. The base that she'd made was a tower that speared itself high into the heavens. Virgo was a fairly rare specimen.

"That's weird. I thought that heaven-winged were supposed to not like forests and their abundance of mana."

"I hear that a lot, too, but it looks like it doesn't really bother me."

"Oh? That's interesting. Maybe one of Virgo's parents took in a large amount of mana."

"You think?"

Using his fingers, Kross started counting off the few exceptions among the heaven-winged who didn't hate mana. "Yes. In the case where one or both the parents intake a large amount of mana, rarely, a heaven-winged will be born and not hate mana. The most famous example would be Lufas Maphaahl, who doesn't hesitate to step foot in places so dense with mana even us elves wouldn't go in. There have been records of her easily stepping foot inside Helheim, for one."

"But Virgo's wings are pure white, though."

"Changes made by mana don't always appear on the surface. It's said that both Lufas Maphaahl's parents also had white wings."

While listening to Kross's lecture, Sei remembered the theory Megrez had told him about.

Oh yeah, didn't Megrez surmise that one of Lufas's distant ancestors ate a forbidden fruit, and Lufas just happened to show it on the surface? Virgo's most likely the opposite. Her parents had taken in mana, but it must have just not shown up in her wings, leaving them pure white. But then who are her parents?

The fact that Virgo showed no dislike of mana at all and in fact preferred being in the forest meant that her parents must have taken in quite a lot of mana. Which, in turn, meant that it was highly likely that one or both of Virgo's parents had been great warriors in the Age of Heroes two hundred years ago.

"We're here. It's just ahead."

Apparently they'd reached their destination while they were busy talking. Petto, who was walking in front, raised his voice and started moving faster.

Following his lead, Sei and the others also sped up and came upon a clearing. The lack of trees was clearly unnatural. The dragon had cleared a circular space to make it easier for it to live in. The ground was thick with soft grass, and normally, it must have made quite the picture, but the first thing that Sei and the others felt upon reaching

the clearing were shivers and shock.

There was a huge body laid out on the ground; it must have been over fifty meters in length. It fit the exact picture Sei had of a fantasy dragon. Its blue scales would normally have reflected the natural light, shining divinely. There was no doubt in his mind. But right now, it was gravely wounded. Its scales were cracked and split, and it was bleeding from everywhere. Its breathing was also faint.

Is that because of its illness? No. No illness alone could do this.

As if just to provide an explanation for all this, four shadowy figures appeared on top of the dragon, looking up as if they'd just noticed Sei and the others.

"Oh? Guests in a forest like this? How rare."

The first one to speak was a woman with a strange form. Her upper half was that of a human's, but her skin was scaly, and her lower half was that of a snake's. She was a type of monster called a lamia, and they were said to be just as intelligent as humans. They were one of the races excluded from humanity under its current definition.

"It looks like they came to heal the guardian dragon's sickness. But it's too late."

The next one to speak was a monster with a fish head. This one was a monster called a merman. One of the merfolk's features was that mermen had the upper half of a fish, while mermaids had the lower half of a fish. Whether or not they could coexist with humans was a subject that had been debated for years, but even so, they were still categorized as monsters. It was rumored that they were currently developing their own culture and society at the bottom of the sea.

"Leave, children. We are not here for you."

Next, spoke a figure that had Sei almost reflexively screaming. It was a bug! The silhouette of the entire body strongly resembled that of a human's. However, its head was a spider's, and it had several spider legs growing out of its back. He was a monster called a "bug-person," and they were basically like beastfolk, except they'd mutated to take on the features of insects and arachnids. Either that, or they had been bugs that'd continued to intake mana and had eventually mutated to a human form. Either way, they were categorized as monsters due to their grotesque and evil appearance and not given any of the rights humanity had.

"Ha ha ha! They're scared! Totally scared! I told you, Sarge, your looks are totally out of the question!"

The last one to speak was a girl with a flower on her head. She also strongly resembled a human as a whole, but her limbs had grass and flowers growing out of them, so there was no way she was human. On top of that, her legs were actually roots upon closer

inspection. They weren't even flesh. She was a dryad, a monster very close to a human but with the characteristics of plants. However, they also were treated harshly and unfairly due to their classification.

In other words, all four of them were from races that were very close to human, but because of technicalities in the definition, they were categorized as monsters. In a way, they were victims of the world.

"Damn you, monsters! Get away from the guardian dragon!" Petto drew his sword as he shouted angrily.

But his words only invited more anger from the four atop the dragon. Their gazes all settled on Petto with ardent fury as if they were looking at the person who'd killed their parents. Then, the spiderman spoke as their representative.

"Monster, huh? True... To the world right now, we're monsters. That's how we've been classified. But just what is different between you and me?"

"What?!"

"Clearly we can talk and communicate. We can come to an understanding. We may look different, but everything else is the same. So then why are we treated as monsters? Why are we persecuted? Why must we be exiled?"

No one could answer the spiderman's question immediately.

Why are you different? I don't know. I can only say it's because you look different.

The lamia girl put her hand on the spiderman's shoulder and held him back. "Stop. There's no point. We've been trying to sue for our rights for hundreds of years. We've been trying to compromise, get closer, but everything we do is ignored. Isn't that why we're making our stand now? Do you seriously think anything will change if you talk to them now?"

The spiderman paused. "Yeah... You're right."

"The only one who can save us is His Grace, Leon. We shouldn't expect anything from humans anymore."

While listening to the lamia and the spiderman talk, Sei felt more turmoil than ever.

They're different... These guys are different from all the monsters I've seen up until now. They're intelligent. They have reason. They can understand us. They might look like monsters, but we can coexist.

Sei wasn't that knowledgeable about this world, and he wasn't sure about the specific definition and differences between humanity and monsters. But he could still vaguely understand that they'd arrived at this conclusion after plenty of pain and thought. However, that was because Sei was a resident of another world. People from this world wouldn't think the way Sei was. All they would register were

the random shouts of some monster because that would have been common sense.

“Shut it, monster! You call doing this to our guardian dragon compromise? Don’t make me laugh! And you wonder why you’re treated as monsters? Ha! You have your answer right here, don’t you! Your mouths claim to be trying to compromise, to meet us halfway, but your hands grip weapons and hurt the pride of our nation! Compromise? I’ve never heard anything more preposterous! Your blood will become rust on my sword, you monsters!”

Petto roared in fury and jumped with feline grace and lightness. It looked like he was trying to finish the spiderman first. But his sword was stopped easily by one of the spiderman’s legs, and he was counterattacked with a kick that sent him flying.

“GROOOAAARRR!” Angered by what happened to Petto, Friedrich roared.

The Sword Saint, said to be the strongest of humanity, ran up the guardian dragon and started unleashing slashes with overwhelming strength behind them. The spiderman took those attacks straight on as well, managing to completely stop the Sword Saint after only a small step backward.

While the Sword Saint was preoccupied and defenseless, the dryad’s whip-like arms crashed into his back before continuing on to bind him.

“Ghh... Woahhrr...”

“Ha ha ha! Weak! So weak! Is this all humanity’s strongest Sword Saint can do? Humans really have gotten weak, haven’t they? Leon was right!”

“Khh!”

Next, Virgo flew off, slashing at the dryad. Her sword flashed and cut off the dryad’s arms. A second flash went straight through the leaf the dryad put up as a guard and carved a fissure in her. It was a wound that would have been mortal for any human. But though the dryad was somewhat surprised, she wasn’t seriously hurt.

“H-Huh? You’re pretty good, aren’tcha girlie!”

The dryad extended some tentacles, but Virgo flew up high, escaping them. Following that, the spiderman and the merman jumped, and they clashed fiercely in the air. The merman and the spiderman attacked Virgo with a harpoon and leg at a speed that Sei couldn’t follow with his eyes, but Virgo parried and defended against all of that with her quick sword skills.

The lamia shot a curtain of magic from her hands, but Virgo quickly reacted, flying through the air to dodge. The merman used that opening to jump over Virgo, slamming down at her with his harpoon. She managed to block the strike with her sword by a hair’s

breadth, though she was unable to prevent herself from falling. She managed to stop her momentum just before she hit the ground, suspending herself in the air for a moment. Taking advantage of that, the dryad charged in from the side to send her flying with her tentacles.

Right before Virgo slammed into a tree, Sei stepped in and caught her, preventing her from taking massive damage. That was when the spiderman spat spider silk from his mouth, binding the two of them up.

“C-Crap...!”

“Wai— I can’t see! My wings are in the way!”

In just a short time, Petto, Friedrich, Sei, and Virgo were all rendered helpless. Faced with that fact, Kross and the others shivered.

The lamia looked at Virgo and sighed. “I’m surprised. So there was someone half-decent here. But with that kind of ability, you’ll be an obstacle to us later. Sorry, but you’ll need to die here.”

“Wait. Look at her. She’s just a child. There’s no need to kill...”

“You’re too naive, Sarge. Just stand back.”

The lamia raised her hand in Virgo’s direction, creating a spear of water. Even Virgo could be dealt a fatal blow if she was in a state where she couldn’t defend herself.

The lamia didn’t hesitate to launch the spear, but before it hit, Richard, Nick, and Shuu took action. Each of them used their weapons to hit the spear of water with the intention to somehow reduce its power, but their weapons were broken instead. The spear of water even went on to pierce through their armor, gouging holes in the three men’s bellies and legs.

Virgo tightly shut her eyes, and Sei was desperately trying to wriggle his way into a position where he could take the attack with his back. But in the end, his efforts weren’t necessary.

A spinning anchor came flying out of the forest, mowing down trees in its path and finally deflecting the spear of water.

“Wh-Who?!” The lamia’s eyes opened wide in shock as she looked at the anchor.

All eyes gathered on the anchor as it drew an arc in the air, returning to its owner.

A man emerged from the forest, revealing himself. He was a handsome man with blond hair and an eyepatch over one eye who wore a white coat. He lifted the heavy-looking anchor like it weighed nothing, fixing the four demihumans with an intimidating stare.

“I’m not important enough for you to have to wonder who. I’m just some guy who happened to fall nearby due to a small accident. But this situation isn’t something I can overlook. I don’t know exactly what’s going on here, so you’ll have to excuse me for acting first.” The

man readied his anchor, his coat billowing in the wind.

Upon closer inspection, the man was covered in wounds. His clothes were torn in places too. Even so, he was filled with power that was obvious at a glance.

Once again, Sei was somehow able to barely feel it through his skin as he thought, *This man... He's strong! Insanely so!* For some unknown reason, the man was hurt, so Sei expected that he wasn't in top form. Even so, the strength of his presence alone was enough to overwhelm the four monsters. The man, one half of the Twins of the Twelve Heavenly Stars and the Fairy Princess's sword, Castor, smiled fearlessly.



Four demihumans were facing off against one handsome man in the forest. By numbers alone, it was four against one. On top of that, the man was fairly seriously wounded for some reason, and the four demihumans had just shown in the earlier fight that they were elites who could easily fight off the Sword Saint, Friedrich, humanity's strongest warrior.

But they were unable to make a move. Just one heavily injured unknown man was completely overpowering them mentally. They couldn't see a single opening. Even in their imaginations, they'd be countered easily no matter how they attacked. They could clearly sense that their power couldn't be compared, since they now knew they were only of middling strength. Their opponent was injured, though... He wasn't unbeatable. Having concluded that, the four of them scattered before assaulting Castor.

"Woaaaaarrgghh!!"

"Hrmph!"

The first ones to go in were the spiderman and the merman. Each of them used their weapons to strike at Castor. The merman's harpoon was stopped by his anchor, and the spiderman's leg was blocked by a single finger. No matter how much the two of them strained against Castor, neither of them could budge.

Castor first kicked away the merman before swinging the back of his fist into the spiderman. The spiderman managed to react in time and avoid a direct blow, but the strike was incredibly heavy! *His movements should be dulled because of the damage he's taken, so what the hell is this power?!* the spiderman thought.

The merman, who'd taken the hit full-on, had hit a tree and was completely knocked out, and the limb that the spiderman blocked with was broken.

"Aqua Blast!"

"Air Slasher!"

The lamia shot a bullet of water, while the dryad launched a blade of air. Castor simply swatted the spells away as if they were flies before quickly counterattacking.

"Ptarmigan!" Castor chanted the spell's name, and lightning spread out of him like wings before piercing through his four foes. The rest of them fell over, trailing black smoke, but they weren't dead yet. Still, a single attack had given them all life-threatening wounds, making the difference between them clear.

As they lay on the ground, Castor spoke to them with a leisurely

expression. "I made sure not to take your lives, but if you're going to keep going, then you're going to have to prepare yourselves for death. Now, I'll ask you once. Do you still want to continue?"

"Mnrr..." The spiderman, who seemed to be their leader, let out a muffled grumble before raising his hand and giving orders to the rest of the group. "We're leaving..."

"Wait, seriously?! Some half-dead person like this should be easy if we all go at him! We won't let our guards down this time!" the dryad bit back when the spiderman calmly ordered their retreat.

The spiderman didn't change his mind. "We've already done what we came here for. There's no reason for us to keep wasting our time here."

The gap in strength was clear. Even if he was damaged, they'd be the ones to die if they continued to fight. The spiderman knew that truly strong people were the most dangerous when they were cornered, so he decided to withdraw. He believed that it was the best choice.

"W-Wait! Who the hell are you all?! Why did you do this?!" Sei suddenly shouted after the four of them as they made to leave.

The spiderman turned around and replied in a quiet voice, "We are people who desire a revolution for this world."

"World? Revolution?"

"Exactly. You humans will only be able to parade around like you own the place for a little longer. When the great Leon gets serious, he'll wipe out both you all and the devilfolk. Then, our time will come." The spiderman answered honestly even though he didn't have to, and the dryad followed suit and turned around as well.

But then the lamia smacked the two of them over the head. "Hey, stop wasting time talking to them. Let's hurry home."

The lamia dragged the unconscious merman behind her as they left, and the dryad raised her hand reluctantly. When she did, they were enveloped in sudden strong winds, blowing them up into the air. They then quickly flew off. Eventually, they disappeared off into the distance.

"The hell was that?" Gantz said as he worked to free Sei and Virgo from the spider silk.

Sweating, Kross responded, voicing his suspicions. "I have a bad feeling about this. From what they said, something really bad is about to happen."

World revolution, humans and monsters, and the name Leon... I have a really bad feeling about this. There's no way this is good. Anyway, I can think about this later. Healing the guardian dragon and everyone else is first.

Kross joined the rest of the group and looked over their wounds.

“Tch, this is awful...”

“D-Don’t bother with us... Get to the guardian dragon first.”

Kross looked over Richard, Nick, and Shuu, and their wounds were ghastly. Each one was a deep wound that reached down to the bone, and even using high-level healing magic, they’d need several days to fully recover. *It looks like they won’t be able to continue with us on this journey...*

Virgo, having finally regained her freedom, bowed to Castor, who’d saved her, before rushing to the guardian dragon. She actually wanted to take more time thanking him, but the guardian dragon’s state was an emergency.

“High Healing!”

She pointed her hand at the guardian dragon, hitting it with healing light. High Healing was a high-ranking fundamental healing heaven-arts. Its effect depended on the skill of the user, so at Virgo’s level, one use would heal around 30,000 HP. This meant that to the world today, she could fully heal pretty much anybody in one shot. But the wounds didn’t seem to heal at all, and the guardian dragon still didn’t open its eyes.

Seeing that, Virgo’s face turned pale. *It’s too late...*

It didn’t matter what kind of spell was used, none of them would have any effect anymore, because the dragon was already dead.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Miss Virgo? Why aren’t you healing it?” Petto grabbed onto Virgo’s shoulders and shook her as he spoke, but Virgo averted her eyes and shook her head.

“Sorry... With my skill, it’s...”

There was indeed a technique to revive the dead. There was only a small window after death where it was effective, but a heaven-arts technique to revive the dead did in fact exist. It was the highest-ranking, most difficult of techniques, and Virgo had yet to learn it. Lufas might have been able to use it, but it was impossible for Virgo.

“N-No way, that can’t be... I-I heard from Sei! You’re one of Lufas Maphaahl’s friends, right? Th-Then, nothing should be...”

“Sorry... I’m the weakest and lowest leveled out of everyone, so...”

“...”

Having heard Virgo’s reply, Petto finally let go of her with a grave expression. His expression warped, looking like he was somewhere between grief-stricken and furious. As a knight, he couldn’t vent his anger and grief on Virgo, so with no outlet in the vicinity, he chose to blame the monsters to barely maintain his mental balance.

“Damn you, monsters! DAAMNNNN YOOOUUUUU!” Petto cried and hissed, all the hairs on his body standing on end.

Castor, drawn over by the outburst of emotion, joined Virgo and Petto. He gave Virgo a serious once-over.

Eventually, Virgo spoke, unable to silently withstand the scrutiny. “U-Um?”

“Ah, sorry. I was being rude, staring at a girl’s face like that. Forgive me. Do you know Miss Lufas?”

“Ah, yes.”

Answering the question “are you Lufas’s friend?” like that was nothing short of a bad move. It wouldn’t have been strange to have been captured right then and there. But the man just muttered, “I see,” before happily nodding and taking a small bottle out of his pocket. Then, he poured the contents of the bottle into the guardian dragon’s mouth.

“Um, what’s that...?”

“It’s called ‘Amrita.’ It’s the pinnacle of alchemy, made by putting water from the Well of Urd into a pot and mixing it with things like elixirs, the blood of a Dragon King, and the blood of a phoenix. Its effect is greater than that of an elixir and can even revive the dead, though it has to be used within a short window after death. It’s something even Miss Lufas only ever made a small amount of.”

Virgo actually didn’t understand much of what Castor said, but she did understand that it was an absurdly rare and valuable thing. As proof of that, Kross’s eyes had already rolled into the back of his head.

“Blood of the Dragon King... Phoenix blood... Water from the Well of Urd... Agabababagabagagaba...”

“U-Um... Is that really all right? Using such a precious thing, I mean.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It seems you’re one of my new comrades, after all. Just think of this as a small form of celebration to welcome you.”

“Then you’re...”

“Ah, right. I haven’t introduced myself. Sorry about that. I am one of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars, Castor of the Twins.”

Having heard the name Twelve Heavenly Stars, Gantz swiftly and suddenly put his guard up. For some reason, Sei didn’t feel like that would be necessary, so he simply continued watching over Virgo and Castor. *Hmm... It feels different... I can feel a sort of calmness that didn’t exist in the other Twelve Heavenly Stars.* To Sei, he was at least calm enough not to warrant immediate caution. Most importantly, he’d just saved them all. Sei felt that being on guard like that would actually be rude, so he couldn’t bring himself to put up a stance for battle.

“Hmm? Looks like the dragon’s breathing again. That’s a dragon’s vitality for you.”

Everyone reacted to what Castor said and looked over to the guardian dragon. They saw that he was telling the truth; the guardian dragon’s wounds had completely healed, and he was now peacefully

sleeping. Seeing that, Castor smiled, satisfied. He walked up to a nearby tree and sat, leaning against it.

“A-Are you okay?” Sei questioned Castor worriedly.

“Ah, yeah. I’m fine. I messed up a little before coming here, so I need to take a rest. I’ll be able to walk again after,” he replied calmly. Then, he looked around at everyone and continued speaking. “More importantly, are you guys sure you can afford to sit around here? I’m not entirely sure what’s going on, but it seems real complicated. I think it’d be a better use of your time to figure this out among yourselves instead of worrying about me.”

Castor’s words had Sei and the rest of them looking at each other.

He’s right. We need to go back and report on what just happened. It was likely that what had happened just now wasn’t a random monster attack. *More specifically, we have to assume that they intend to make an enemy of the entire country—no, all of humanity.*

“You’re right. Nick and the others need serious medical attention too. Let’s go back.”

“But they might come back. Don’t we have to stay and guard the dragon?”

Sei suggested going back, but Gantz made the point that they had to leave someone here on guard. The one who volunteered was Virgo.

“Then I’ll stay. I want to chat with Castor for a while too.”

“Okay... But you make sure you run away the moment you think he’s going to try something. He’s one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. You don’t know what he’ll try to pull.”

“Ah, okay.”

Worried, Kross tried to warn Virgo, who’d volunteered to stay. But Virgo was also one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars, so in a sense he was telling her, “There’s no telling what *you* might do.” Of course, that wasn’t what Kross had meant at all.

In the end, Sei and his party left the forest, leaving Virgo and Castor alone with the guardian dragon.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. He’s got a lot going on too, doesn’t he? Virgo thought as she ran towards him, sighing.

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“I’ve got an ace. So Dina skips her turn.”

“Ah! That’s unfair!”

“I don’t have any cards I can use... I’ll draw. Hm... A three of hearts.”

“Ah, I don’t have any threes. I’ll draw three.”

While Virgo was off at the emperor’s place, we had nothing but free time. At the moment, we were playing cards with a set that I’d

made with alchemy. The game we were currently playing was American page one. In this game, the player has to play out cards that match suits or numbers with the card the player before them played, and different numbers have different effects. For example, the ace card that Libra played skipped over the next player's turn. And the number three, which Aigokeros played, forced the next player to draw three if they didn't have a three in their hand. Also, if the player has no legal cards to play, they must draw a card from the deck, and the first one to play out their entire hand wins.

By the way, the winner of this game had been Karkinos, with Scorpius coming in second, which meant that we were currently playing for third place. Aries just played an eight. It could be played regardless of whatever suit was in play, and the player could name a suit for the next player.

"I choose spades."

"Then We shall play this."

I played out the five of spades from my hand. Five didn't have any special effect. Next, Libra played a nine of spades, eliciting a wail from Dina. Nine's effect was to reverse the turn order. In other words, Dina had effectively been skipped again, and it was my turn. I felt a bit bad for her, but she only had one card left in hand. If we just let her have her turn with no plan then she could win, so what Libra had done was warranted.

"Ah, then I'm done too."

Aries also only had one card left. He played out his last card, a six of spades, and took third place.

Crap. If this keeps going I could place last.

"By the way, Miss Lufas, have you ever thought about selling these cards? If things go well, you could make some B I G profits."

"Something as simple as this would just be copied immediately. There won't be much money in it," I answered Karkinos while looking down at my own hand.

This world didn't have the concept of copyrights or intellectual property, which meant good ideas were free for the stealing. That was why dwarves, hating that, had made their own patents and license system. Blutgang was probably the only place that had anything close to a copyright system.

While I pondered that, I finally managed to play out everything in my hand, grabbing my place in the rankings. *Oh man, fourth place? That's kinda something...*

"Miss Lufas!" As soon as I won, the door opened with perfect timing, and Virgo stepped in.

That deal with the emperor's thanks and healing the guardian dragon is finally done. It was a little longer than I expected, but I guess that was

just enough to make my creating these cards worth it.

But Virgo's face looked somewhat panicked, so I quickly revised my assumptions. *Something troubling happened, didn't it...?*

"What happened, Virgo?"

"There's something I need to tell you... But first, there's someone who wants to see you, Miss Lufas."

"Hmm?"

I got up from the sofa and walked to the door. There, I saw a handsome pirate-themed guy wearing a white coat waiting outside. I didn't remember him, but I did feel a strange sense of nostalgia.

He's probably someone I know. That was what I felt in my gut. *Let's see. I think I should start by searching my memories.*

Recently it hadn't been very hard for me to pull out Lufas's memories as long as there was a trigger for it. I turned my consciousness inward for a while, searching through memories I didn't recognize.

He's... Ah, that's right. I remember now. He's Castor.

He was the big brother of the Twins pair and one of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars, and if I remembered correctly, he was well-balanced between magic and physical combat. In the game, his monster name had been "Fairy Sibling," and he'd come as a set with his little sister, but apparently over here he was moving around completely independently. Thanks to that, not even I knew his stats here.

【Twelve Heavenly Stars: Castor】

【Level】 : 800

【Race】 : Fairy

【Attribute】 : Wood

【HP】 : 32500/55000

【SP】 : 2300/9800

【STR (Strength)】 : 4208

【DEX (Dexterity)】 : 2100

【VIT (Vitality)】 : 3005

【INT (Intelligence)】 : 6000

【AGI (Agility)】 : 3995

【MND (Mind)】 : 800

【LUK (Luck)】 : 1092

【Equipment】 :

☐Head: —

☐Right Arm: Anchor Lance (STR +1200, AGI -200 two-handed weapon)

☐Left Arm: —

☐Body: Sky Pirate's Uniform (Reduced SP usage for Wood element

spells)

☐Legs: —

☐Other: Sky Pirate's Coat (Halve physical damage)

Hmm... This is my first time seeing his individual stats, since he usually comes as a set with his sister, but he seems pretty capable alone too. The fact that he's normally a set with his sister shows, though. Overall, his combat strength is lower than Aries's, even with equipment factored in. He seems to be a magic-attacker type who can handle front line work as well, so he overlaps a little with Sagittarius... Well, Sagittarius specializes in magic attack and speed, and Castor can handle being on the front lines to a point, so it's possible for them to have different roles.

Still, I feel kinda bad thinking this, but his stats are really meh. Even Aries is better at being a jack-of-all-trades. Actually, he shouldn't have had any equipment back when he was a monster... Monsters shouldn't be able to equip stuff in the first place.

Wait, does that mean that if I make equipment for the monsters like Aries and Aigokeros they'll get even stronger...? I can set that aside for later. What I should be focusing on is why his HP is low like that.

"Oh my, if it isn't Castor. What're you doing here?"

"L O N G T I M E! It's been two hundred years since we've last seen each other, hasn't it, Castor?"

Scorpius and Karkinos, who had already won their way out of the current game, showed their faces from behind me, calling out to Castor. Then, Aries and Libra joined in, too, their faces peeking out to get a good look. It looked like the fight for not being last place was between Aigokeros and Dina. In my peripheral vision, I could see them staring at their hands and grumbling.

"By the way, it seems you're quite worn down. Is there a reason for that?"

"About that... I apologize! The other day, the Key to Reach the Heavens, which you entrusted me with, was stolen by the Devil King...!"

Key to Reach the Heavens...? The heck? I delved back into my memories while watching Castor apologize so profusely he might have prostrated himself before me at any moment, but I could recall no such key. There wasn't anything like that in the game, at least.

I hadn't exactly memorized the names of every single item in the game, since that list would have been massive, but I had made sure to do so for anything that'd be useful, which was why I was pretty sure no such item existed. I did, however, know of a consumable item that could open any door in a dungeon once called a dungeon key. I decided to just hold on to that information and ask Dina later. She'd probably know.

Wait, so he fought the Devil King...? That's insane. With those stats, he wouldn't have been able to win, even with a miracle.

"It's all right. Don't worry about it. Dina, heal him."

"W-Wait just a second, please. I'll be able to win in just a bit..."

"Ah, I won."

"....."

Looks like it's over.

Dina, who placed last, dejectedly got up and walked over to us.

This should be her first time meeting Castor, so I guess I should introduce them.

"Castor, this girl is Dina, and she is currently working as our advisor. She herself says that she was here two hundred years ago, but she barely leaves an impression, so We cannot tell if that is the truth. She's plenty suspicious, but We hope you'll get along with her."

Castor's expression froze hearing my rather blunt introduction, but it was true that she was suspicious, so there wasn't much else for it. Even if I did my best to smooth things over, the truth would just come out later, anyway. I wasn't that great a talker in the first place either. So I decided to just be honest and frank from the beginning. Dina was looking at me exasperatedly from behind, but I decided to just let that go.

"A-Are you sure that's okay...?"

"Well, she's not a bad person. Probably."

"This is Virgo. She's Parthenos's successor to the Maiden seat. She's still immature, but she has potential. Get along with her, as well."

"Yes, understood."

There wasn't really anything suspicious about Virgo, so I just introduced her normally. That was cruel to Dina, you say? No, that was just a consequence of Dina's actions.

"Now then, will you tell us what happened?"

I looked over to Virgo and shifted the topic over to whatever news she had. It felt like some sort of trouble, so while I was loath to, I couldn't leave it alone.

"Yes, to tell you the truth..."

What came out of Virgo's mouth was trouble, just as I'd predicted. Four demihumans had killed the guardian dragon and spoken of their anger at the current members of humanity as well as their grief over their persecution. *So their leader is Leon, huh?*

This is... Yeah. No matter which angle I consider, it sounds like a declaration of war towards humanity is coming soon. Attacking the guardian dragon is very close to a declaration of war already, though. Basically, a bunch of monsters that were very close to being categorized as humans reached the end of their patience and decided to rise up and

demand their rights.

On top of all that, the reason for Sagittarius's betrayal completely matched what the demihumans had said according to Libra. It was easy to see that Leon was the one riling them up. *That idiot. What the hell is he thinking making enemies of both humanity and the devilfolk?*

"What do you all think?" I asked the members of the Twelve Heavenly Stars who were gathered behind me. They all replied with basically the same answer.

"I can only say he is rash and imprudent."

"He's a F O O L."

"An irredeemable idiot."

"I also think this is a bit poorly thought out..."

"He can go die."

"There's a limit to how little you can think."

Libra, Karkinos, Aigokeros, Aries, Scorpius, and Dina all laid into Leon's shortsightedness without holding back. Honestly, though, I agreed with them.

Yeah, like... He's an idiot, right? Just stupid, right?

Even ignoring everyone else, has he just forgotten about Benetnasch? I get that he'd be able to do something about Megrez and Merak as they are now. And sure, okay, I understand he thinks he can win against Levia and Blutgang. But antagonizing both Benetnasch and the Devil King at the same time is just about the most idiotic thing I've ever heard.

I know this would sound cruel to anyone else, but maybe Leon'll just self-destruct if we leave him alone. I feel sorry for all those poor demihumans who he involved in his schemes, though...

They were just fooled by Leon when they were backed into a corner. Now they, along with Leon, were in a position to be surrounded and beat upon. It was too sad. If Leon were by himself, I'd have just left him to his own devices. Then I could just retrieve him once he'd been beaten to a pulp by Benetnasch and the Devil King. But I just felt too sorry for the other demihumans.

"But something's off. Leon aside, was Sagittarius ever that big an idiot? He should have at least been smart enough to get a read on the situation... Maybe I just thought too much of him?"

"Hmm, that is weird. The Sagittarius that M E knows would have been more careful and C O O L."

From their conversation I gleaned that Leon had apparently always been like this. *Well, I've heard all this about Leon before. Maybe he's the same type of person as Benetnasch.*

But from Scorpius and Karkinos's reactions, Sagittarius was different. At the very least, he was smart enough for it to feel strange to everyone, which meant that there was something fishy going on. Either that, or there was some sort of circumstance forcing him to help

Leon. It was also strange that he'd left a message for Libra. If he were going to set up a trap, he shouldn't have let us all know he was here. It was almost as if by declaring that he was siding with Leon, Sagittarius was actually saying, "Be careful, I'm on Leon's side."

Looks like our next destination is decided.

Next, we would be heading over to retrieve both Leon and Sagittarius. I would just have to confirm the truth myself.

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With our next destination decided, there was no longer any reason to stay here in Draupnir, which meant our next step should have been to leave. Yet, we were still in Draupnir. This was because Virgo had come back with a message from the hero saying he wanted to talk, so I put off our departure for a while.

With nothing else to do, I was simply relaxing on the sofa in Tanaka, waiting for the hero. Aigokeros seemed fit to burst as he mumbled to himself, "How dare he make our master wait..." But explaining the demihuman attack to the emperor was probably just eating a lot of time.

Well, all I have to do is relax and wait. I sipped on the tea that Libra had made for me while looking out the window at the scenery. Apparently she'd bought quite a lot of tea from Draupnir in anticipation of our long journey.

"By the way, Dina, do you know what the Key to Reach the Heavens is?" I whispered to Dina, who was sitting next to me.

From how Castor was talking, there was no way I shouldn't have known what it was, but I just couldn't remember it no matter how hard I tried. I was certain that I could find it in Lufas's memories, but something stuck while I was trying to dig them up, so in the end, I had nothing. It seemed as if any memories about this were buried really deep.

"No, I don't know much about it either. The only thing I've heard is that the one who obtains it will be able to receive a power that can change the world..."

"Change the world, huh?"

Changing the world... Meaning it can bend the rules? My immediate impression was that it sounded like dev powers or at least GM powers granted by the devs. Either way, I still didn't understand anything other than that it was a dangerous key.

What the hell was Lufas planning to do with something like that two hundred years ago? Wait, actually... Why didn't she use it in the fight with the Seven Heroes? Maybe there are some conditions to be able to use it so she couldn't? Or did she just refuse to use it even though she could? The

former would make sense. The problem would be if it's the latter. If Lufas could have used it two hundred years ago but didn't, it would make absolutely no sense. It would mean that she threw away a winnable battle.

I wasn't quite sure what was possible and what wasn't with this ability to "bend the rules," but it should have been able to give her a big advantage. Even so, she didn't use it. Instead, she gave it to Castor and lost.

I don't get it... This is seriously just looking like Lufas lost on purpose two hundred years ago. Urgh, I'm starting to get into assumption territory. There's not enough info. I'll need a bit more to form a better conjecture.

"Ah, Miss Lufas. Sei and the others are here."

"Hmm."

I stood and paused my musings when Virgo spoke up. When I opened the door, I found the hero and his party, looking dumbfounded. Sei was hit especially hard by the sight, mumbling, "It's a camping car, but this is supposed to be fantasy..."

Ah... Yeah. That's right, of course he'd react differently from the others, since this design wouldn't be possible if I didn't know about the modern world. Also, the thought of a ruler traveling around in a camping car must be pretty surreal.

It was just like how the sight of a certain end-of-the-century conqueror who usually looked cool traveling on a giant horse would suddenly turn into a weird, surreal scene if he were using a car instead. That exact scenario applied to me right now. I felt like all my dignity was being stripped away from me, but to be honest, all my dignity was doing was making everybody afraid of me, so this was probably actually a good thing.

"Well met, hero. We have been waiting."

I decided to greet the hero in a friendly manner first. They were taking the effort to meet us halfway, and I didn't want to treat them rudely for that.

Hmm... It looks like this kid is thirty percent nervousness, thirty percent fear, and forty percent determination right now. He's making a pretty good expression. As for Gantz, he'd already met me, so he wasn't that afraid or nervous. Jean was the same. In fact, I couldn't discern any of those emotions from him. He was operating as usual. It was comforting.

On the other hand, the elf bro was full of nothing but fear as he looked at me. *This guy never changes either... Wasn't he like this when he summoned me too? He was uber terrified of me back then as well... Maybe he suffers from social anxiety?*

Behind everyone else were the fluffy duo of a cat and tiger beastfolk, as well as a gorilla beastfolk.

So the party is a hero, an adventurer, a mercenary, an elf, and then

three beastfolk? Isn't this way too heavy on the front-liners?

Before I could say anything, Virgo spoke up. "Huh? Did something happen to Nick and the others?"

Nick...? Ah, right. Jean's muscle-brained adventurer friends. Now that she mentions it, I don't see them anywhere.

"Ah, they're pretty heavily wounded, so they're recuperating in Draupnir."

"Indeed. I have joined this party in their place. I hope to fill the hole left by their absence."

I wasn't sure of the details, because I hadn't been there, but apparently the three adventurers had retired from the party, and a cat joined instead. *Wait, is that really all right? This isn't nice to say, but that cat person looks super weak...* He looked just like a bipedal cat, so he was super cute, but he looked the opposite of strong. Against a cat-loving Japanese person this would be a trump card to make the enemy self-destruct, but I couldn't imagine him contributing in a serious battle. Cats existed to be loved. They shouldn't be forced into battle.

"Okay then. Let us hear what you have to say."

"Okay. To tell you the truth..."

What the kid, Sei, talked about was extremely simple. Essentially, he doubted whether or not I was really an enemy, so he came to confirm his suspicions.

Well, that was brave of him. I shouldn't be saying this about myself, but I'm pretty frickin' scary by this world's standards. If you add the incident where the Twelve Heavenly Stars uselessly giganticized themselves, I can't honestly say I'd have a good impression of me. Sure, he has Megrez's recommendation to go on, but he was my enemy two hundred years ago. So even he should have thought I might attack and kill him somewhere in his mind. But he still managed to retain his self-awareness as someone without any preconceived notions and chose to talk to me.

That's a pretty hard thing to do, isn't it?

"Hmm. It's true that We don't care to actively antagonize you. We should have said that when We were first summoned, though."

I fixed the elf bro with a reproachful stare, and he let out a small yelp.

Isn't this guy a little too afraid of me? It's not like I'm gonna eat you or anything, you know.

"Which means you would consider working with us against the devilfolk?"

"That is not a bad idea, but that will have to wait until later. We have more pressing business to attend to."

Cooperating with the hero wasn't a bad idea, but my next destination was the area where Leon and Benetnasch were fighting. Other places aside, this was definitely somewhere where they could

die with levels that low. If they wanted to survive meeting Benetnasch or Leon, they'd need to be at least Twelve Heavenly Stars class. If they weren't, they wouldn't even be able to run away.

So basically... It sounded mean, but the hero party would just be a burden.

"Business?"

"Yes. It seems like Leon's riling up monsters and trying to lead them to ruin. Leon's only getting his just deserts, but We feel sorry for those monsters. The failure of the follower is also the failure of the lord, so we must head over and stop that fool."

"If that's the case, this involves us too. It'd be a disaster if the monsters united and waged war on us. We'll help you stop that Leon guy too, Lufas." Gantz didn't hesitate to propose cooperation.

This dude's as agreeable as always. Help, huh? Well, I'm happy for the thought... But... Putting things bluntly, at their level, they'd die just by being near Leon and I as we fought. On top of that, I had no idea what Benetnasch was doing. It was way too risky to bring them with me.

But still, if I just told them, "You're all too weak. I don't need you," then the seeds of friendship that had taken all that effort to plant would be killed just like that. *I guess in this case, it'd be best to send them to some place that still has meaning, but is still relatively safe?*

"The fight with Leon will be intense. We will be fighting him alone. Could We trouble you to search for and inspect the centaur village in our stead?"

The main subject of my worries could be said to be Leon and Benetnasch, but I was worried about Sagittarius just as much. Scorpius had said that the incident this time was uncharacteristically shortsighted for Sagittarius, which meant that there was a reason for him to be so shortsighted. By my estimation, that had something to do with something he'd mentioned when talking to Libra, something he wanted to protect. If we managed to do something about that, we could avoid a fight with Sagittarius.

Still, centaurs were fairly powerful monsters. It was a little too dangerous to send the hero party in alone, so I decided to pick out some people to accompany them.

"Virgo and Castor will go with you. It'll be easier for you all to deal with people you know already, right?"

The hero party suffered from an overwhelming lack of casters. Still, I couldn't very well send Dina, who was so suspicious, or Aigokeros, who was generally just dangerous, with them. In fact, I couldn't trust Aigokeros not to kill them from behind, so there was no way he was going with them, which meant the people I could choose were limited. I decided to choose Virgo, who was normal, and Castor, who was relatively normal. It'd actually be more dangerous for Virgo

to come with us, though, so I mostly wanted to keep her away from danger. It was too dangerous to take her with me to where Benetnasch potentially was.

Instead, I decided to bring Aries with me this time. His percentile damage would work well against both Leon and Benetnasch. This was especially true for Leon. If he really had returned to his stats when he was a boss monster, his HP should be over 1,000,000, which meant that Aries could easily just slam home 99,999 damage. It was true that Aries was on the weaker side of the Twelve Heavenly Stars's combat scale, but no one was more useful against powerful enemies than him. The stronger they were, the more powerful he got.

"Also... Yes... We should give you a means of travel as a freebie."

I used a mix of the materials I'd bought in Blutgang to whip up a second camping car real quick. Leaving everyone else aside, Virgo was still a girl. I didn't want to force her to camp out in the open without even a means of cleaning herself, so I outfitted the golem with the minimum required facilities, making sure to have a separate bedroom for the men. Thanks to me using the limited space to add in a personal room for Virgo, a shower room, and a toilet, the bedroom for the men ended up a little cramped... *But it should be better than camping outside, right? Yeah...*

I won't deny that I'm being biased.

In the end, it was too much work to think of a name for camping car-type golem number two, so I just named it Suzuki.

【Suzuki】

【Level】 : 350

【Race】 : Artificial Life Form

【HP】 : 20000

【SP】 : 0

【STR (Strength)】 : 620

【DEX (Dexterity)】 : 120

【VIT (Vitality)】 : 700

【INT (Intelligence)】 : 9

【AGI (Agility)】 : 1650

【MND (Mind)】 : 75

【LUK (Luck)】 : 100

Good. The stats are kind of mediocre, but it probably won't be getting into any fights anyway. Now I can just command it to protect Virgo and the others in an emergency and to listen to Castor and Virgo's orders. I should also have it listen to the hero and his party's orders just in case, but I'll also tell Suzuki to throw them out if they try to abuse it.

Lastly, I ordered it to ram anyone who tried to lay a hand on

Virgo in *that* way just hard enough to not kill them. Well, it was just a safety measure. I didn't expect it to come up.

"Um... Why a camping car, Miss Lufas?"

"I figured it would be well-suited for long journeys. Would you have preferred a truck?"

"No, that's not the problem..."

"We know. Well, We won't say anything specific, but We do know a little about the other side."

I evaded the kid's question and ended the conversation. I couldn't very well just tell him that I was a Japanese person inside. There was no way he'd believe me. *I* wouldn't believe me. So there was no point in sharing that info.

Sei stood there, looking at me doubtfully for a while, but eventually he realized that there was no point in questioning me further, so he gave up on the subject.

★

★

"She's moving. I can feel it, Maphaahl... I know you're near."

The castle was dim. The girl sitting on the throne inside opened her hitherto closed eyes. Outside, lightning and thunder raged, and the shadows made by the flashes of light hid her expression. But the edges of her mouth were still barely visible, and they formed an upward arc, exposing her fangs. With a slow and leisurely motion, she got up from her throne, receiving her cloak from a vampire who was waiting to the side.

"You're going out?"

"Yes. I'm bored of waiting. I'll be going to greet her."

Putting on her black cloak, the girl fanned out her silver hair behind her. Her blood-red eyes shone like blazing fires, and her whole body exuded an unhidable aura of the strong. Even one of the Seven Luminaries—no, one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars—would feel it on their skin if they tried to face her.

Precious few existed in the world who were able to fight one-on-one with Lufas Maphaahl. One was the strongest of the Twelve Heavenly Stars, the famous Lion King, Leon. Another was the head of all devilfolk, the Devil King. The last one was the strongest of the Seven Heroes, and its biggest problem child. Anyone who knew her would describe her by saying, "She's always been dangerous," and in fact, she was the only one who hadn't been hit with the Goddess's brainwashing two hundred years ago. She was the pinnacle of all vampires.

The girl, thinking that it was too much work to go out the front door, opened the nearby window instead and stepped up onto the windowsill. Then she leapt. Covering a great distance in an instant,

she flew in a straight line towards her sworn enemy.

“Now, let’s act out the continuation of that day, my sworn enemy. This time, I won’t let anyone interfere. I will be the one to kill you, Lufas Maphaahl.”

There was only one person in the Seven Heroes who didn’t need to be manipulated to want to reap Lufas Maphaahl’s life, and right now, she was acting with clear intent to kill.

Phecda Wants to Evolve Into an Adventurer

The jolly halflings, or to us, floresiensis, shared a slot as one of the seven races of humanity along with dwarves. Originating from humans, they were mutated by mana to become smaller halflings, before further splitting into merry, outgoing nomadic halflings and introverted halflings who stayed in caves. Thus, they became dwarves and halflings, this world's version of the floresiensis. Scholars were split on which race came first, but these days the common theory was that dwarves came first.

The biggest piece of evidence supporting that were their heights. It wouldn't make sense for a race that lived a nomadic lifestyle to mutate or evolve to be even shorter. The opinion of scholars was that they would instead have changed to have larger strides to make walking long distances easier and become tougher to be able to deal with a variety of environments. In fact, there was an example of just that among the demihumans in the form of giants, though their brains had gotten smaller inversely to their body size, so they'd lost their intelligence and got removed from humanity. But the halflings, or floresiensis, were small. Considering their nomadic lifestyle, this was clearly strange. If the dwarves were first, though, it would make sense that they were so small.

First, the humans who would become the smaller races moved into caves, and because of the cramped restrictions of caves, they became smaller and smaller. From there, some of them chose to start living outside and became halflings (more commonly known on Earth as floresiensis). This was the scholars' theory, though no one knew if this was in fact correct. The halflings might have started from people leaving the caves, or maybe they got tired of traveling and became dwarves. Either way, there was no doubt that out of all of humanity they were the closest to each other being as how they branched from the same path.

But their cultures and personalities also clashed the most. Halflings loved traveling and freedom, so they just couldn't understand dwarves, who chose to stay put. On the other hand, dwarves loved the quiet. That was why the halflings considered them weird. As for the halflings who loved freedom and travels, not all of them were spending their time as they pleased. Some of them had

circumstances that forced them to live the opposite of that way of life.

He, Phecda, was a halfling. He was employed as a soldier by the largest human country, the Crown Empire. Even while he dreamed of traveling the world freely, he instead spent every day donning his armor and spending his time in a fortress.

Sounding full of self-derision, Phecda consulted his comrade, who was standing next to him. "Hey, Dubhe... What do I look like to you? I've been wondering recently whether I'm actually a dwarf."

Today's job was to guard the gate to the fortress. Their job yesterday was to guard it, too, as well as the day before that. He was sure that they would be doing the same thing tomorrow, and the day after, and probably next week, and basically every day until they died. To him, being stuck in this small place and being forced to wear limiting armor was just like being a dwarf, which led Phecda to that sarcastic question.

"You bring to bear some strange questions. You have the bearing of a halfling from any angle." The one Phecda asked his question to and who insisted on peppering his answers with quirks to assert his personality was his comrade and polar bear beastfolk, Dubhe.

On one side was a huge over 2.5 m tall beastfolk, and on the other was a halfling only 1.3 m tall. The two lined up together seemed like a strange pair and were a somewhat famous sight.

"Hey, Dubhe. Why are we standing here, day in and day out?"

"Bearcause we don't know when a dragon might bring some violence to bear. The Crown Empire is currently engaged in a grizzly war with the dragons."

"Shouldn't we just run instead of fighting a fight we can't win? We can't even really deal with a single dragon, and our opponent's leader is the king of all dragons, the 'Hundred Heads,' you know? There's no way we humans can win."

The Crown Empire was humanity's largest country. Lead by Emperor Borealis, the Crown Empire played host to all seven races of humanity and boasted not only bountiful lands but the world's greatest economy. But that was only up until a few years ago. Right now, it was nothing but the world's most dangerous country thanks to the threat of dragons.

One day, the king of all dragons, a living calamity, had attacked humanity out of the blue. The entire continent had been consumed with fear in an instant. Dragons had always been around. They were symbols of fear, and everybody knew they shouldn't be messed with. Up until now, there had been a mutual understanding between humans and dragons. Dragons didn't actively attack humans thanks to the troublesomeness of their united nature as well as their sheer numbers, and outside of a few evil dragons, most dragons were fairly

peaceful anyway as long as they weren't attacked. Either that, or humans simply weren't impactful enough to register to them.

Ladon, the recently crowned head of the dragons, was of a different opinion. He felt that humanity was an annoyance. Ever since he'd attacked, the conflict had been one-sided. Several villages and towns had already gone up in flames, and the numbers of the lost had reached the five-digit mark.

In response, the Crown Empire built and staffed four fortresses in cardinal directions, as if to encircle its capital and the surrounding towns. It wasn't to stop the invasion. The purpose of the fortresses was to alert the country as fast as possible in the event of an attack and also to buy time for the country to prepare a counterattack. The soldiers here could be described as a suicide squad, formed under the assumption that they would die in battle.

Phecda and Dubhe were employed in one such fortress, and they spent every day standing in front of a gate on guard.

"You know, for all your complaining, you've been bearing with this job a long time without running, Phecda."

"Well, yeah, I guess."

Phecda actually wanted to escape this country as fast as possible. But he couldn't do that, so he sat here instead. He had a younger sister and brother, and with his parents gone due to an epidemic, they only had Phecda to rely on as the eldest brother. On top of all that, his younger sister was also sick and in no condition to take any long trips. In order to take his sister with him out of this country, the one thing Phecda needed was money, enough to pay for passage aboard a ship, a carriage ride, and food. The fees for her medicine were stupid high and yet not nearly as high as the cost of healing her completely.

At any rate, he needed money, money, and more money. Even knowing the risks, Phecda had volunteered for this position. Since they were basically guaranteed to die if they were ever attacked, the pay was good. As long as they weren't attacked, the job was a cushy gig where they could basically steal wages by just standing around all day. In the end, all that meant was that Phecda had sold off his life. He had entered the most dangerous job in the world to protect his little brother and sister.

Well, they weren't guaranteed to die... The dragons might assault from a different direction, or they might get bored and call off the invasion altogether. In the worst case, Phecda could still "lose" his job by forfeiting a leg and being branded as useless. If that happened, at least he'd finally be able to take his siblings with him and leave. Though, if the dragons really did come in their direction, there was no way a miracle would just drop into Phecda's lap and allow him to get off with such light injuries. It was almost a one hundred percent

chance that he'd die...

"Hey, Dubhe. I could say the same about you too."

"I bear goodwill towards this country, since it accepts beastfolk. I'd like to defend this country from a grizzly fate."

"Hah, you softie."

Countries that accepted beastfolk were few and far between, since they were close to being monsters themselves. In fact, several beastfolk were already treated like demihumans instead of humans, and demihumans got the same treatment as out-and-out monsters. Probably thanks to that, beastfolk as a whole tended to be outcast from society no matter where they went.

After that line, the two of them stood around in silence for a good while, but in the end, guards still had nothing to do most days, and boredom won out. In order to stave off the boredom, there was no choice but to talk more.

"Dubhe, imagine the war ends and you're still living. What do you want to do?"

"You know, the hero Michael said that people who say that tend to bearish first."

"Who?"

"He was a beary strong hero who was summoned from another world via Exgate a long time ago. It was rumored that he could take on any foe with no weapon, just a bear of gloves and pants. He was a truly beartacular person."

"That just sounds like a pervert to me."

"I admire him beary much."

"You shouldn't."

Otherworld heroes were people who occasionally surfaced in heroic tales and the like. Phecda knew that they apparently came from some world called "Earth," but nothing other than that. Unfortunately, Phecda had basically no interest in history.

"So? Isn't there something that you want to do?"

"Hmm, let's see... I'd beary much like to expand the number of countries a beastfolk can walk around boldly in."

"Oh? Those are some big dreams there. You wanna be like a king or something?"

"I've bearily thought that far ahead. What about you, Phecda?"

"Me? Let's see... Yeah, I wanna travel. I want to walk all around the world and see everything Mizgarz has to offer."

It's an impossible dream. I know that. I'm sure that we'll just end up dying on a battlefield somewhere. I know that too.

But that was exactly why Phecda admired the outdoors. That was precisely why he couldn't stop dreaming the impossible.

I know I'll just end up feeling empty, but I should at least be free to

dream, right? It's the only joy I have in life. I don't even know if I'll die tomorrow. I'd like to at least be able to dream.

"Phecda..."

"Wha?"

"Something is coming from over there." Dubhe sounded uncharacteristically serious, so Phecda's expression naturally changed as well.

Are they finally here? Did they decide to come this way? His heart beat heavily in his chest as he also wondered why no alarms were sounding. There was a lookout in a tower. If anything huge like a dragon came anywhere near, they'd know.

The answer to Phecda's question came quickly. It wasn't a dragon that was approaching them from far away. It was a wagon.

* *

The wagon was driven by a merchant that had traveled a long way from the neighboring continent and his escorts. Zeno, the head of a huge trading company that bore his name, was already an old man of seventy, but he was still powerful and active even in his old age. He had a surprisingly small number of escorts, with only four people accompanying him. There was a heaven-winged girl with black wings, a muscular man, an armored dwarf, and an elf with glasses. It was a strange combination.

Adventurers were a rough bunch that walked hand in hand with death, using their lives as recompense for living so freely. It was the one job that Phecda secretly admired above all others. If a person were to compare the social standings of a soldier to an adventurer, the soldier would have the overwhelming advantage. There were as many soldiers that looked down upon adventurers as there were stars in the sky, and normally no soldier would want to be an adventurer. But Phecda belonged to the extroverted and freedom-loving halfling race. The lifestyle of the adventurer just really appealed to him.

Wow, it's rare for a dwarf to leave his cave to become an adventurer. How ironic is it that someone like me is living like a dwarf, while a dwarf is living how I should be?

Apparently they'd come to sell weapons in the capital, but first, those weapons needed to be inspected. There was no way they could just be let through with no questions asked. Understanding that, the merchant Zeno cheerfully agreed to the questioning, and so it was decided that they would all be staying in the fortress.

That night, Phecda came upon the group of adventurers eating in the mess hall after he switched shifts with the night watch. Sitting in front of them was a man with slicked-back blond—or rather, almost ochre-colored—hair and tan skin. They seemed to be having a merry

conversation. His name was Alphecca, and he was a skilled swordsman who was in charge of this entire fortress.

“Huh? Well, if it isn’t the captain.”

“Oh, hey there, Phecda. I was just talking to these adventurers here. They’re amazing! This is the rumored dragon killer party.”

“Huh? Dragon killer? ...You mean from that bullshit story about a couple adventurers from the other continent managing to kill the evil dragon Nogard?”

“You shouldn’t call it bullshit when they’re right here. Well, it’s true that I also didn’t really believe it until I met them, though.”

Dragon killing adventurers from the neighboring continent... It had been the subject of rumors a little while back. Apparently they’d killed a real dragon with only a handful of adventurers. It was an impossible story, and Phecda had considered it an utter exaggeration. No, he still considered it that way. After all, such a thing happening was just patently impossible. A country could rouse its entire military might and assemble an army numbering in the tens of thousands, and even then they would only maybe win. A dragon wasn’t something only a handful of people could claim victory over. *If a dragon was that easy to deal with, then we wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place.*

“Right, Lufas. Could you show me your sword one more time?”

“Sure, I don’t mind.” Lufas, the woman with the black wings, placed the sword she wore at her waist on the table.

Phecda wasn’t very well versed in swords, but even so, he was a soldier. It was obvious to him even at a glance that the sword was giving off an incredible sense of presence...of strength. Even a complete amateur who didn’t know the first thing about swords would believe that this was a strong one. That was just how amazing it looked.

“Apparently this was made from a couple of Nogard’s fangs. A sword made out of a wyvern’s fang wouldn’t feel like this. I can’t believe I only managed to learn that a true masterpiece of a sword wouldn’t even need appraising at this age.”

“Y-Yeah... I could tell at first sight too. This sword is amazing.”

There was no room for doubt. The sword was real. Even Phecda had seen a sword made out of a wyvern’s fang, and he’d also seen scammers trying to sell swords like that while advertising that they had been made from dragon fangs. But this sword was different. There was no way it was a knockoff like that.

“This sword is unshakeable proof that that story was real. No regular adventurer would be walking around with a sword like this. No country would give an adventurer something like this, so they’d only be able to get this sword if they killed the dragon themselves.”

Phecda couldn’t refute Alphecca’s statement. *That’s true. If they’d*

done anything short of killing the dragon themselves, like only helping, they would never have gotten a treasure like the fang, though they'd probably still have been rewarded somehow. She has that sword precisely because they actually fought and killed the dragon. That fact imprinted itself onto Phecda without being filtered by his brain.

"And sorry to bring this up again, but... How does one million el sound? That's all I have. Would you give me the sword for that?"

"Sorry, but no."

Sounds like Alphecca's trying to buy the sword. It's not like I don't get it... No, I get it so much it hurts. We're in a fortress that's basically on the front lines of a war with dragons. It's only natural to want as strong a weapon as possible.

However, Lufas immediately shot the offer down, and it seemed to Phecda like Alphecca had expected it, though he was still sad.

"Come on, Cap, that's obviously an impossible ask."

"Yeah, I figured... A country would easily pay one hundred million el for something like that. Yeah, there's no way she'd sell the sword for this pittance."

"What?! One hundred million?! Lufas, sell it! You're okay with your bare hands anyway, aren't you?!"

"As if!"

After hearing how much it was worth, the swordsman Alioth got a greedy look in his eye. But Lufas had no desire to sell.

Well, it's true that strong fighters can make their own fortunes with a good weapon.

Lufas quickly put the weapon away, causing both Alphecca and Alioth to groan in disappointment.

"Hey, if it's all right with all of you, could you tell me about your adventures? I'm interested in adventuring."

Phecda pestered Lufas and the others to talk about their adventures, and they cheerfully agreed. They talked about how the party had gotten started and their fight with the dinosaur. They also talked about exploring some ruins and how Alioth had gotten struck by traps over and over. The next story was of Mizar tossing a bomb into a cave which had been settled by goblins, burying them alive. After that was the time they'd been hunting monsters on the beach, but when Lufas had tried to capture a spiral-shell monster, she messed up and got a crab instead. Lastly was how they'd met Mizar, as well as the fight with the dragon.

Every single one of those tales made Phecda's heart soar, increasing his aspiration for the job. They were all like the stuff of dreams to him, but the sudden sounding of a whistle brought him back to earth. And Phecda wasn't the only one. Tension ran through all the soldiers in the mess hall, including Alphecca, as they focused

on what they could hear.

The whistle sounded again. It happened twice more, and Phecda started to sweat. The whistle was a signal from those on the watchtower saying they saw something in the distance. The type of whistle differentiated the type and size of the enemy force, and the number of times the whistle was blown indicated how far away they were. The first set had indicated medium danger. The fortress was being attacked not by dragons, but by their followers or retainers. The second had indicated their size. The whistle had blown three times, so the enemy force was at least company size.

Then lastly, a different whistle blew, and Alphecca and Phecda nodded to each other. The last one informed them of how far away the enemy was, and this time they were about fifty kilometers away. The distance was hard to deal with; it was in the perfect spot where they would look far away, but they were close enough to close the distance in no time at all. High-leveled monsters could move at a speed that defied logic and common sense.

“Hey, what was that sound just now?”

“It’s saying that your inspection is over...” Alphecca replied to Alioth’s question with a lie.

This fortress would now become a battlefield, and they shouldn’t involve adventurers in it. That was why Alphecca lied.

“Huh? But we were told it’d take an entire day...”

“Apparently it went way faster than expected. I’m surprised too.” Alphecca pretended like it was no big deal by brushing off Alioth’s misgivings.

Alioth looked satisfied with that answer. “I guess it’s just like that sometimes?” Alioth muttered to himself, and he didn’t press any further.

“Okay then. Take Zeno and hurry on your way. Get outta here.”

“Hey, hey. You know how late it is? And didn’t you tell us that we could stay?”

“Yeah, until the inspection was done. It’s done now, so there’s no reason to let you stay.”

I bet this sounds so unreasonable to them... Honestly, if what Alphecca was saying were true, then it actually wouldn’t be that strange.

But Alphecca was a soldier. He couldn’t allow civilians to be involved in a battle. He was surely thinking that only the soldiers had to face death today, so playing the villain and forcing them out was necessary.

Turning his back to Lufas and the others, Phecda ran for the gates, meeting up with Dubhe, who had remained there. Either because of his extra stamina or because of his own wishes, he worked longer than everyone else. But right now, it wasn’t just Dubhe who was there.

Everyone stationed at the fortress was gathering at the gates.

Eventually, Alphecca showed up after seeing off the carriage carrying the adventurers, which had left from the opposite side of the fortress. He was accompanied by the fortress' staff officer, Meridiana. Meridiana would be turning seventy this year. With a remarkably long and crooked nose, she looked a lot like a witch from fairy tales. It was a sign of how backed into the corner this country was that they'd had to drag someone that old out onto the battlefield.

"Their size?"

"Around two hundred wyverns. They're company sized."

"Two hundred wyverns, huh...?"

Wyverns, unlike full dragons, were a different species of monster that only looked similar to dragons, but now they were under the umbrella of the powerful dragon king and would frequently mount attacks on the empire. While they weren't as powerful as a full-fledged dragon, they were still a threat to humanity. Each one of them was around level 70-80, and there were very few people who could take a wyvern one-on-one. There were two hundred of them coming this way... In human terms, their force was easily larger than a battalion.

On the opposite side, the fortress had two thousand soldiers stationed in it. Including volunteers, captured monsters, and alchemist-made golems, the Crown Empire's total forces exceeded one hundred thousand soldiers, and almost all of them were tasked with defending the country.

Once again, the role of the people in this fortress wasn't to decimate the enemy. It was to report an enemy attack to the rest of the nation and buy time for them to form a retaliatory force. No one was expecting them to win.

"We have ten times their numbers... They're confident, aren't they?"

Alphecca was joking around, but Meridiana bit a retort. "Yeah. Confident they'll kill all of us."

"You got that right."

In just pure numbers they'd be able to fight a single wyvern with ten people. But as stated earlier, wyverns were by no means weak. A highly skilled soldier like Alphecca could take a wyvern by themselves, but that would be impossible for common soldiers. Even ten to one, their chances of winning would be very low.

"How's the report to the higher-ups?"

"I sent the messenger pigeon already. They should be getting it soon."

"Good."

Alphecca only asked Meridiana for the bare minimum of information before quickly changing tack to planning their course of

action.

The enemy was a force of wyverns of about company size. With the usage of traps and other tactics, victory wouldn't be impossible, but it still wouldn't be very likely at all. It would be nothing for the main force to take out that number of wyverns, so the goal was to buy time until the main force could muster for an assured victory. There was no need for them to push themselves and lose their lives.

"This is an order to all soldiers: we will now be entering combat with the wyverns. Our goal is only to keep them from continuing their attack. There's no need to force ourselves to defeat them."

The force that came this time wasn't enough to call a vanguard. To the dragons, something like this was just in the realm of poking and testing the empire. There'd be no end to it if every soldier of the empire sacrificed themselves trying to kill off the attacking forces every time. All that would happen was that the empire would eventually run out of soldiers, leaving them wide open for the dragons. So no matter what, the soldiers of the fortress needed to stop the wyverns here.

"The strategy will be Plan A. Don't rush. We can just move like in practice. Make sure you don't give up hope and act in desperation. Show me your guts. Struggle to live until the end without giving up. My order is this: live, even if you have to crawl through mud to do it!"

Alphecca's short speech lit a fire under the soldiers as they responded with a war cry. In order to raise morale, Alphecca knew that he'd need to force himself to give a show to heighten their excitement. Otherwise, the soldiers would be swallowed by their fear.

Yeah, I'll make sure I survive. I'll survive, return, and shove this in their faces. This fight isn't a fight to die. It's a fight to survive.

Drawing upon their training, the soldiers all moved towards where they should have been according to the plan. As for Phecda and Dubhe, they were on standby. Their role was to engage the enemy in battle at the gates. It was the most dangerous role in the base.

The wyverns had gotten close enough to see from the foot of the gates when fire arrows were launched all at once from inside the fortress. Meridiana also cast her Fire magic in concert with the arrows, spawning a wall of fire as the arrows landed. There were barrels filled with oil around where the fire arrows were landing, camouflaged by grass and the like.

Suddenly engulfed in fire, the wyverns started to run, seeming confused. However, Alphecca simply stood with his arms crossed and didn't react. The two alchemists that flanked him put their hands to the ground and transmuted a large wall of earth. Then, the ground under the wyverns crumbled beneath their collective weight, dropping several down a pit where there were iron spears waiting for them.

“Assault squad, charge!”

Responding to Alphecca’s order, the soldiers that were waiting in front of the gates all raised their spears at once. For spears, they were very long and seemed hard to wield. They were probably around three meters long, so they weren’t well suited for battle.

Phecda and Dubhe both picked up a spear, and the entire squad ran forward all at once.

The earthen wall that had just been made by the alchemists had holes in it to allow spears to poke through it, and the soldiers all stabbed their spears through the holes in unison. The seemingly useless length of the spears was actually to prevent counterattacks from the enemy and allow the soldiers to stab one-sidedly.

Both ends of the wall exploded simultaneously from the other side. The source was explosives that had been set there beforehand in order to stop any who would try to go around the wall. However, the wyverns weren’t limited to moving on land. Several of them reached the obvious conclusion and took to the skies. Right when they did, a hail of arrows was there to greet them. The arrows were tipped with something similar to a balloon, which broke when it hit the monsters. There was almost no damage, but it turned out to be filled with a very sticky liquid, which stuck to the wyverns and slowed their movements. The liquid also stopped the wyverns from being able to flap their wings well enough to stay in the air. One by one, they fell to the earth, forced to crawl miserably on the ground.

Of course, the soldiers wouldn’t let such a chance go. Phecda heaved his long lance upward so that the falling wyverns would skewer themselves on it. Anything that actually made it to the ground was quickly taken care of by Alphecca.

“Next spear forward!”

Phecda pulled back to collect his spear once again, and his spot was smoothly taken over by another soldier from the front line, who wasted no time in stabbing his spear through the port in the wall.

Hmm, we’ve been dealing with this battle pretty well so far. With ten dead, I suppose we’re doing well, Alphecca thought. For now, we’ve set the pace, but the fight is just beginning. The next wave will probably take a wider detour to get around the wall, and they’ll be careful of arrows too. Not to mention that the wall isn’t exactly indestructible.

If the enemy were bound to the ground, Alphecca could have considered taking a formation to encircle them, but since the wyverns could fly, a lot of strategies and formations were rendered useless. Geez... *Flying is so unfair, isn’t it? Goddammit...*

Alphecca charged into a wyvern that had gotten through the siege of arrows, slicing it apart as he passed. He quickly returned his sword to his sheath before looking towards the wall like what he’d just

accomplished was no big deal.

There were other wyverns that had managed to get past the wall, but they were shot down thanks to Phecda's remarkable skill with the bow. Alphecca fought the desire to whistle in appreciation. While Phecda was short, he was in excellent physical shape and a skilled archer. Not to be beat, Dubhe was facing a wyvern head-on, forcing it to submit through sheer power. It was obvious that Dubhe was a powerful fighter, and he was also one of the few people who could take a wyvern one-on-one from the front.

I don't want to let them die... Not those guys... To Alphecca, the two were still young. They had a bright future filled with possibilities open to them, so much so that Alphecca was sure that if they survived, they'd become great enough to carve their names in history. *If someone has to die, let it be someone like me, who's lived a fairly long and fulfilling life. Young seedlings like them shouldn't be picked ahead of their time.* It was an exceedingly soft and naive thought for the battlefield, but that was exactly why Alphecca was loved and respected by his subordinates.

Alphecca's eyes never strayed from the ongoing battle as he readied himself, preparing to react, give out orders, and make the best decisions possible no matter what happened. Even crossing his arms in a show of composure was a calculated move to reassure his soldiers. Just by standing firm, a commander greatly affected the morale of his soldiers, so even standing still was part of Alphecca's job. But such fictitious bravado could be turned into gut-wrenching despair in an instant.

A shadow fell over the battlefield. Everyone reflexively looked up and saw the manifestation of fear. Its body was big enough to block out the light of the moon, and it was calmly looking down on the soldiers.

"A d-dragon..."

It wasn't a mere wyvern. Right now, a real, honest-to-goodness dragon was looking at the soldiers. It surveyed them with a look that said that it was looking at trash.

No way... He definitely wasn't there a second ago. And none of the lookouts spotted a dragon either. Did they just miss it? No way, surely not something that big? Look at it. That monster has to be, like, fifty meters long! Like, there's no way that happened! Did... Did it fly over?! Did it come over from beyond where the lookouts could see at a speed faster than they could blow the whistle?!

People often held the misconception that dragons were slow because of their size. They were greatly misinformed. Given a day, it wasn't impossible for the species said to be the strongest in Mizgarz to do a lap around the whole planet. Some scholars even claimed that

their top speed was over a hundred times the speed of sound. According to a certain scholar, dragons were a monster that combined the strength ratio of a bug with the size of a whale.

A rhinoceros beetle could lift twenty times its own weight, and a grasshopper could jump dozens of times its own height. But that was possible only because they were so small in the first place. If they were human sized, then they would just be crushed under their own weight. Dragons had that strength in an even larger body. Even while being so huge, they could lift dozens of times their own weight and leap to the ends of the earth in a single jump. They even had human-level intelligence and could use magic. That was how powerful dragons were. Fighting a dragon meant fighting something as big as a whale with human intelligence, a bug's strength, and magic.

"F-Fire! Fire, fire!"

In a panic, the archer squad loosed their arrows. But the attack wasn't successful. The arrows fruitlessly bounced off its scales, failing to even cause a scratch. Dragon scales were strong. They had the hardness of diamond, but with high flexibility and toughness, and could even resist mana.

The dragon looked upon the fortress as if it were looking at an eyesore and simply started drawing breath.

"Crap, all of you, get out of there!" Alphecca screamed, and the soldiers quickly retreated. The speed of their retreat reflected the thoroughness of their daily training.

Then, the dragon released its breath, easily gouging a hole into the fortress, which should have been incredibly sturdy. As if it were taking a bite out of space itself, the breath damaged the fortress, greatly causing all the soldiers to turn pale.

Just a single breath held so much power. Just a simple action that seemed as light as blowing some lint off a desk caused so much destruction.

"No...way... The ground, there's a furrow all the way out to..."

A dragon's breath was its most iconic and powerful weapon. Seeing it once in person showed that off more than a thousand words ever could.

A furrow was shaved out of the ground, as if someone had used a giant shovel to clear snow all the way to the horizon. Of course, there wasn't actually any snow around, but the ground itself was probably as soft as snow to a dragon. Walking would probably have them sink into the ground, and a breath would send it flying. A human's and a dragon's way of looking at the world were totally different.

They were monsters.

In that instant, Alphecca and all the other soldiers realized that they didn't have a snowball's chance in Helheim.

It's impossible now. Two thousand people is nowhere near enough to deal with this. No, "deal with" isn't even the right phrase. We probably can't even wound it.

Dragons were a mobile calamity, and fighting them wasn't even an option. It was much like how no idiot that would try to fight a tornado with a sword existed, or how no fool existed who could psych themselves up to yell at an erupting volcano that they were its opponent. Such futility was so obvious anybody would figure it out instantly. As soon as the dragon had noticed them, they should have given up on fighting and ran.

We, the empire, were... We were wrong... This isn't something we can stop with just two thousand soldiers and a fortress...!

The fortress held no meaning anymore. Alphecca was sure of that. After all, the dragon could just ignore the fortress if it really wanted to. With its overwhelming speed, the dragon could have just flown over and assaulted the center of the nation any time it pleased. Even if it didn't, it could probably take down the fortress itself with a single tackle.

What do I do? How should I save even one more person? Alphecca didn't care if he himself died. But he couldn't allow himself to waste the lives that had been entrusted to him. *They can't be allowed to die wastefully here just because they were accompanying a talentless man like me.*

While he was thinking, Phecda and Dubhe jumped in front of Alphecca to shield him as they took swipes at the dragon. Of course, they didn't deal any damage. It was sad how little their attacks mattered.

Annoyed, the dragon opened its mouth, a flame that would immolate the tiny retaliators igniting inside it.

"S-STOOOOOPPPP!"

The dragon's breath—never left its mouth.

The next moment, a black shadow came flying in from the side, blowing the dragon away.

It flipped once, twice, three times. In an unrealistic turn of events, the dragon was thrown back in a tailspin. One of its fangs had snapped in that one strike, and scales from its cheek had been ripped off and sent flying. The dragon hit the ground, causing it to shake and digging a furrow as it continued on into the distance.

"Apsaras!"

Following that, a bird made of water flew through the air, sweeping up the wyverns and avoiding the soldiers as if it were sentient before bursting.

The soldiers turned to look at the source of the unexpected help and saw the adventurers that should have left already.

That elf named Megrez must have cast the spell just now. Its scale and power is absurd.

Almost half of the original two hundred wyverns had disappeared in one strike, but it was still dwarfed by the first punch that had been thrown by Lufas. Of all things, the heaven-winged girl punched the dragon with her bare hands to send it flying.



“Y-You’re...”

“We owe you for the meal, so we came back,” Lufas said, drawing the sword at her waist.

Then, the sword extended and twisted like a snake, flashing across the battlefield. The sword bit into the wyverns one after the other, turning each one into a corpse with a single strike.

Mizar placed his hands on the ground and created golems. The artificial soldiers formed a line to protect the human soldiers. From behind the line, Megrez launched another spell, and Alioth ran through the battlefield to assault the wyverns.

“I-Is this a miracle...?”

“Hey, Dubhe, am I dreaming right now?”

“I think I’m dreaming too...”

“You forgot to make a bear pun there.”

Another epic tale was unfolding before their very eyes, and the ones who were fighting were heroes. Just four adventurers had already managed to destroy the entire horde of wyverns. The dragon returned and threw a blow with all its might, but Lufas stopped it with one hand. The blow, which was made with an overwhelming size and weight difference, caused the ground under Lufas to cave in as she received it, but Lufas herself hadn’t budged an inch. Then, she countered. In a flash, she jumped in front of the dragon’s face and unleashed a straight right. The dragon was launched backward, and Lufas followed. To others, it looked as if she’d kicked the air, and in the next moment, she was already caught up and attacking.

She continued to chase it further. Flying even faster than the dragon was, she kicked it upward before once again flying up ahead of it and punching it back down. But she wasn’t finished yet. Lufas dropped and reached the ground faster than the dragon yet again, kicking it away as it fell into range.

The dragon rolled away like it was a ball, its horns and claws snapping off and flying in all directions.

To finish it off, Lufas raised both hands together.

“I order you as your master: bisect mine enemies with your steel blade. Come, Karkinos!”

A crimson-red form jumped out of the rift in space, answering Lufas’s call. It was a gigantic crab monster that was just as big as the dragon. The crab grabbed the dragon by the neck with its pincers and slammed it into the ground. Then the pincers closed. The dragon’s hard scales, which should have protected it, did nothing as its head was easily separated from its body and fell to the ground.

With its job done, the crab waved its pincers as it retreated back into the crack in space. The literal instant kill had Alphecca

dumbstruck.

Eventually, the situation caught up with some of the soldiers, and there was an uproar. As more and more soldiers regained their senses, they added their voices to the yell. Eventually the yells became cheers loud enough to shake the ground.

“W-WOOOWWWW! Amazing, utterly amazing! You’re all, uh... Anyway, you guys are great! Dammit, that’s the only way I can describe it!”

“Hey, man, is this a joke?! Did we really survive that?!”

“I’m gonna go back and confess to the girl I like!”

“The hell?! Is this a dream?! Dammit, I never wanna wake up!”

Among all the soldiers’ cheers, Alphecca couldn’t help but notice that his fingers were trembling.

Is this fear? No, it’s elation, excitement. With the threat of the dragon in front of my face, I was convinced of humanity’s loss. I thought that even the notion of fighting was ridiculous.

But... Ah, I see... Hope was right here. Here, with the heroes. We can win! As long as they’re here, humanity can win!

Later, he would swear loyalty to Lufas, and Alphecca William would later go down in history as an extraordinary warrior who stayed by Lufas’s side even in the fight with the Seven Heroes. His autobiography would say that this was the start of his epic tale. On that day, humanity bore witness to numerous miracles, and that marked the start of humanity’s counterattack against the dragons.

“On that day, I witnessed the start of a story,” was what Alphecca had written down in his autobiography.

Eventually after his death, Alphecca’s autobiography would become widespread, and in its popularity, it would raise a question and show how heroes ought to be. Every book that he wrote always ended with the same line:

“I don’t believe Lufas Maphaahl would come to an end like that. I just don’t. I’m sure she’ll come back someday. She’ll come back and once again show us countless miracles. That’s what I believe.”

Afterword

It's been a long time, everyone. I'm Firehead. I'm kind of the author, and the owner of this bar, "Afterword." I serve alcohol and listen to the complaints of the customers who come here. That is my job.

Oh? Seems like there's a customer today already...

Laws of Physics: "Hey, bartender! Gimme somethin' to drink! Somethin' strong!"

Looks like the customer is the Laws of Physics. Looks like he's had it rough recently, but that doesn't change what I have to do. As he asks, I serve him alcohol.

"Hey. Welcome to the Afterword. This tequila's on the house. Just drink it and calm down, please."

I served up some tequila, and the Laws of Physics downed the glass all at once. He drank well. After that, his cheeks flushed red as he breathed out, and he flattened out on the table.

Laws of Physics: "Dammit! That Lufas, she's finally started dissing me in the main story! 'Laws of physics? No idea who that is.' That's what she said, you know?! Bartender, gimme another!"

Apparently being openly dissed in the story proper was a huge shock to him.

I silently served more alcohol to him.

Laws of Physics: "That bitch... She doesn't know how hard I've had to work in the shadows! She only makes use of me when it's convenient, like for gravity, but as soon as I work against her, she ignores me completely!"

His complaints were perfectly reasonable, but I knew someone even more unfortunate than him. Oh...? Speak of the devil. He's here.

Law of Conservation of Mass: "Bartender, I'd like something to drink. Something really strong."

"Will orange juice do?"

Law of Conservation of Mass: "I'll kill you."

Oh my, he can't even take a joke. The world sure is harsh. I did as I said and served him orange juice, and he downed it all in one gulp.

Law of Conservation of Mass: "This is orange juice!"

Yeah, sorry. It is. This time I poured him a glass of vodka.

Laws of Physics: "Oh, Mass. What's wrong?"

Law of Conservation of Mass: "Heh... I got canned."

Laws of Physics: “Huh?”

Law of Conservation of Mass: “It’s a notice of dismissal. Says I don’t need to come to Mizgarz anymore.”

Ah, so he finally got fired... Well, of course he wouldn’t be needed in a world where the Twelve Heavenly Stars giganticize like it’s nothing. In fact, he’d be in the way.

Law of Conservation of Mass: “Tch! Well that’s just what I wanted anyway! Those bastards just keep going gigantic over and over and over again! As if I wanted to work in a ridiculous world like that!” he said as he downed his vodka, his face bright red.

He honestly should have just kept with orange juice, given how weak he is.

“Sounds awful, customers.”

“It’s all your fault!” they both said.

“Ouchies!”

I got hit. This world is truly illogical and unreasonable.

dingaling

The bell that announced the arrival of a new customer ran throughout Afterword. Apparently we have a new customer.

Mercurius: “Bartender, a martini.”

Oh my, oh my. Well, if it isn’t Mercurius, who died in vain in the main story.

Mercurius: “Don’t say, ‘in vain.’”

Mercurius downed his martini in one swig and heaved a huge sigh.

Mercurius: “Hey, Bartender... What the hell was I, in the end?”

“The perfect fool who self-destructed after worrying about things all by himself even though he just wanted the girl he liked to like him back but was too much of a coward to put himself out there.”

Mercurius: “I’ll kill you.”

Well to be honest, he did land quite the unfortunate role. All he had to do was retrieve a weakened guardian dragon’s blood as well as the elixir. It should have been a simple job, but in the end, it all turned out like that before he could react. On top of that, Luna still probably wouldn’t have noticed his feelings, even if he’d succeeded. That girl’s totally focused on Terra, after all.

Mercurius: “Man... I knew that though... Even so, I wanted to do something...”

“I mean, why did you choose that moment to do something in the first place? You could have been more cautious about things.”

Mercurius: “I mean, it couldn’t be helped, right? I was panicking and in a rush too. I just heard that Luna encountered Aigokeros and was almost killed the other day. She managed to survive this time, but when I considered that fact, I realized that next time she might not be

so lucky... I wanted to free her from the fate of all devilfolk even a day sooner. I thought that Lufas Maphaahl wouldn't bother with her once the rest of the devilfolk were gone... Even if she didn't notice me, as long as she was happy, I'd..."

"Woah there. Why're you making things all serious? This is the Afterword! 'As long as she's happy...' And then you'd take a pose like, 'Schwing!'"

Mercurius: "I'll kill you."

But he punched me anyway. How unreasonable.

Mercurius downed even more alcohol and eventually passed out. After he did, Jupiter, who'd been shamefully done in by Libra in volume 2, came to get him.

Jupiter: "As always, sorry about this. I'll take him home, so... Ah, here, I'll foot the bill."

"Thanks." Just like that, the bar was empty, and I was alone.

Oh ho, sounds like it's about time to close shop, and by that, I mean I'm running out of space. All right then, everyone, let's all meet again in the next volume.

See you again.

-Firehead

Thank you
so much
for reading
volume 4!

I want a
Karkinos
barrier for
myself...!!

Yahako



Bonus Short Story

A Perverted Scorpius Suddenly Appeared

Scorpius, the Scorpion of the Twelve Heavenly Stars, was a pervert. It was obvious from the way she dressed that she was an exhibitionist, and she also happened to be a sadist. Overshadowing all of that, she had an incurably heavy Lufas complex, Lufacon for short. Her feelings towards her lord, Lufas, also included the proper respect and affection for her leader, but she also held a great lust for Lufas. Basically, she carnally desired Lufas.

On top of that, Scorpius herself had no intention of hiding that fact. For a monster like her, desiring someone meant directly acting upon those desires. In a sense, she was much more honest than humans, who tended to hide their affections. Since Scorpius was like that, of course she would try to sneak into her lord's bed every night to assault her. Tonight she would throw herself into battle for the umpteenth time as well.

It was two in the morning. A single shadow quietly crawled through the interior of the car, which was wrapped in silence. The shadow, who was Scorpius, stuck herself to the wall, shuffling along it while blending into the darkness on her way into Lufas's room. While Scorpius may have looked like a beautiful woman, she was currently clinging onto a wall with her four limbs splayed out and breathing hard. Put bluntly, she was more than a little creepy. A *lot* more.

Reaching the door, Scorpius quickly surveyed the area. She knew that she was currently in front of Lufas's room, and that everyone else was most likely already asleep.

Getting past this point was when the problems started. Among the group was a singular being that never needed to sleep. Of course, that being was Libra. Libra, who was active twenty-four hours a day with no need for sleep, was nothing but irritating to Scorpius as she stood guard over Lufas every single night. Before Scorpius had been added back into the party, Libra used to sit guard outside of Tanaka, but recently she'd started standing outside of Lufas's room, fixating wholly on protecting her. At the worst times, she would place herself inside the room in a specific spot that she seemed to have marked as hers.

Libra's not outside the door, which means she's inside...

There was no doubt in Scorpius's mind that Libra already had her gun equipped on the other side of the door and was waiting for

Scorpius to open it before she opened fire. It was a fact that Libra would shoot her comrades with no hesitation. Scorpius had been shot by her more than ten or even twenty times.

Now then, how should I deal with this...? After a bit of thought, Scorpius eventually decided to just step inside, because she was feeling pressed for time. Thinking was not Scorpius's strong suit. She just wasn't that clever. Using the dexterity she'd gained by repeated attempts to sneak into Lufas's bed, Scorpius used a wire to pick the lock on the door before carefully opening it.

And...there was no fire from Libra.

Huh? That's strange...

Even while having her doubts, Scorpius hesitantly peeked into the room. She saw a certain perverted goat trying to infiltrate through the window.

Wha—?

Scorpius froze out of surprise for a scant second. The next moment, Scorpius realized that Aigokeros had gotten into Lufas's room before even she had. Then, she felt a rage burning inside of her that completely shelved her original goal.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, sneaking into Lady Lufas's room?! I'll kill you, you rotten goat!"

"You're trying to assault her at night again?! Do you never learn?! Today is the day I'll have you pay for your endless disrespect!"

The two perverts completely ignored what they had just been trying to do, exploding in irrational rage at the other's actions. Birds of a feather flock together. Fights only occurred because the two participants were on the same level. From a third-person perspective they were basically the same. In fact, they were, but the two of them couldn't see the fault in themselves, even if they could see it in the other.

Aigokeros and Scorpius both leapt outside at the same time before kicking off the earth once again to break into a dash. Both of them were mercilessly trading blows at each other's faces.

"You're dead!" they both shouted.

The two clashed at high speeds over and over again. While the reason for their fight was incredibly base, their power levels were anything but. From an outside perspective, it would seem as if it were merely two shadows clashing.

This ridiculous fight showed no signs of ending even after an hour. After two hours, the area had been completely devastated, while after three they'd finally turned into their gigantic monster forms to continue the battle.

Finally, the four-hour mark had passed since the fight had begun.

"Why are these two sprawled out on the ground covered in

blood...?”

“The two perverts simply crushed each other. There is no need for you to concern yourself with this, master. Not one speck or iota of it.”

It was six in the morning. Lufas tilted her head in confusion while looking at her two subordinates laid out on the ground half dead, Libra reacted with harsh words and a cold attitude.

As it happened, Libra had spent the night hiding under Lufas’s bed.



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A Wild Last Boss Appeared! Volume 4
by Firehead

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